

out a howl of disappointment. They were

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only her work clothes, but they were all she had. What would she wear to Nashville?

The summer passed in an orgy of preparation for the coming wedding, and a constant parade of visiting relations, so that the house seemed to be cluttered with Jacksons and Hannas and Kirkmans and seamstresses and drapers and tailors. The family would be in Nashville for a week, which meant ten complete new outfits for Sally and Sassy, for no woman of substance would consider wearing the same thing twice in such fon-nidable society.

Merchants in Florence sent bolts upon bolts of cloth for their inspection.

House slaves stitched and sewed and measured and fitted, and the house was filled with such an overwhelming urgency of female matters that Jass was happy to be out of it all. He had been measured for new clothes too, by the tailor from Florence, but it had taken only a few minutes of time, and he found it difficult to understand how the women's could take a whole summer.

Jass was trying to keep his vow not to see so much of Easter. The unspeakable thing that had happened in their embrace had shocked him. He knew what it meant, and he knew that he wanted her, but he wasn't ready for such an enormous adventure yet, such a complication to their relationship.

Even on those few occasions when he did try to see her, it was mostly a waste of time. She was having only two new dresses for Nashville, simple linen for day, muslin for evening, but she fussed about them almost as much as any woman going to the wedding. In any case, she was in the big house most of the time, getting instruction from Angel in her new duties, and didn't want to be away from the center of dressmaking activity when she had nothing else to do.

Cap'n Jack was as busy as the rest of the staff, at the beck and call of the visitors and responsible for the welfare of the visitors' slaves.

Jass, left to his own devices, spent the time riding and swimming and visiting friends from school in the district. He even spent a cheery afternoon with Wesley, who enjoyed Jass's company when they had no quarrel, and delighted in titillating Jass with his most recent conquests of female slaves. They

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had sparred together for a while, and Wesley had given Jass several hints on the finer points of boxing, even though the information might very well be used against him in some future fight with Jass.

William, Alexander, and George had come home for the summer from school in Nashville. They were always pleased to be with Jass, but were completely content, possibly happier, with their own company. Cheeky, bustling, even more of a tight-knit group than before, they became known to everyone as the Trio, and several more distant relations, elderly or absentminded, began to forget their individual names.

They had arrived at the beginning of summer in a bustle of boxes and carts and schoolboy noise, in the care of their cousin John, who had come to look for a house in Florence, since several of the Kirkmans were moving to Florence. The Trio clutched at their mother, weeping, begging her never to send them away from her to that awful school again, but within minutes they were gone, causing havoc in the garden, chaos in the kitchen, and endless tolerant vexation from Tiara in the slave quarters, for she had been nurse to them, as she had to all the boys, and still loved them and their boyish games.

The Trio left chaotic, frustrated joy in their wake wherever they went, and especially for Sally. She loved them all dearly, but it was a less fretful love than she had lavished on her older children when they were young. She guessed that she had become used to motherhood, and didn't worry so much whether she was doing the right thing. So she could shout at them, and cuff their ears, and laugh at their games, or simply tell them to get out from under her feet when she was too busy with other things. Whatever her other duties though, she tried to set an hour of each day aside, exclusively for them.

Running a household as large as theirs was never easy for Sally, least of all in the summer months when they had so many visitors. Although she could rely on Parson Dick, and Julie, the cook, several of the younger girls needed constant supervision, were frequently sick or forgetful of their duties. Sometimes, Sally thought, the more house slaves you had, the more work there was to do. She envied those few Northern hostesses she had met who, employing domestic staff, could sack them if they were incompetent or lazy, for it seemed

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excessive to Sally, but not to some others, to have a slave girl whipped or sold away for neglecting to empty a chamber pot or dust under a bed.

Her various female relatives understood this-they shared the problem-but still they made demands on her time, for she was one of the reasons they had come.

Jass found it hard work trying to remember all the family connections.

Elizabeth, his mother's daughter by her first marriage, had married his cousin Tom, which meant she was both his half sister and his first cousin once removed. But what about Sam, their young son? Was he first cousin twice removed, or second cousin once removed, or half nephew? These things seemed to matter in a family, especially to the women. Aunt Letitia Hanna was the family authority, and very sharp with Jass whenever he flunked a relationship. "You will have to find an intelligent bride,"

she had admonished once, clearly dismissing him as a dunderhead. "Someone has to remember all their birthdays."

The cotton ripened, the buds bursting with the white gold that was their fortune. It was going to be a good yield, over a bale an acre, and with the recent reduction of tariffs demanded by South Carolina, the profit would move from the good to the spectacular.

The work songs of the picking gangs could be heard everywhere on the plantation, drifting in to James through the open windows of his study, where he

sat for hours on the sultry, sweaty summer days, counting his wealth, as if knowledge of the scale of it was insurance against its ever being taken away. When not in his study, he spent time at the stables inspecting his lucrative stallions and watching their training. He still fretted about John Coffee's visit, but the horses calmed him, or distracted him, and he put on a jolly, Irish face for his relatives, especially when they were Irish.

It pleased him, too, when rich landowners came with their wives and daughters to call, the girls doing their best to make an impression on young Jass. The aristocratic families of the South were always plotting their survival, and although Jass was too young to be in a serious race, it was never too early to start building alliances. It pleased James, and thrilled Jass, that he was the object of these welcome attentions, and it amused Sally that any visit by a family with a daughter to

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dispose of was quickly followed by a visit from Lizzie Perkins and her mother. Sally watched with approval as Jass grew better and better at conducting himself in the presence of young ladies, and toward the end of summer, Sally realized that Jass was going to be a considerable catch.

She had always thought him a good-looking boy, but the Jass who was measured for his new clothes at the beginning of summer was not the Jass who was fitted into them at the end, even though allowance had been made for growth. The cuffs of his trousers had to be let down a solid inch, and the sleeves of his jackets. His chest had filled out and his neck thickened, so that his new shirts were already tight, and Sally clucked in despair.

That clucking stopped when he tried on his new evening clothes, and presented himself for her inspection, grinning because he knew they suited him.

The elegant velvet coat, the pearly white jabot, flowing in elaborate ruffles from his neck, and the beautifully cut stovepipe pants changed him, before her very eyes, from a boy bursting out of his seams to a strikingly handsome young man.

"What on earth are you crying for?" he laughed. And Sally laughed too, and

could not tell him why.

The end of summer also brought the last of their visitors and, for James, the most welcome.

Sara came from Baltimore with her family, and for a few days James tried to lose himself in an orgy of Irish reminiscence, and music, and stories of their youth.

Sara could see that something was troubling her brother but, like Sally, knew it was useless trying to provoke him to talk before he was ready.

The two women discussed it at length, but Sally could shed little light on the matter.

It had begun with the visit of John Coffee, she said, and she was sure it was related to Andrew and, somehow, the Indians. James scanned the newspapers avidly when they arrived, but was interested only in that one subject. A few weeks before, some reporters from the Washington newspapers had come to interview James, but he had refused to discuss his private business dealings.

Then John Coffee died, of a chill he had caught coming back from Washington. James had ambivalent feelings about

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the death. He tried to mourn the friendship they had once enjoyed, but had grieved enough for that long ago. He sent his condolences to the family, and attended the funeral, and said all the appropriate things, but there was a constant sense of relief in the back of his mind that John, at least, would no longer trouble him. He did feel a genuine sense of loss at this evidence of the passing years.

Toward sunset, on the day before she was due to leave, James asked Sara if she would like to visit the stables with him. They walked to the racecourse arm in arm, gossiping, and leaned on the fence to watch the horses being exercised. Lauderdale, grazing in a paddock, came trotting over to his owner.

“He’s from Miss Shipton, and he’s going to make me a fortune,” James said, stroking the stallion’s nose and feeding him the apple he had put in his pocket for the purpose.

Sara laughed. “All you’ve talked about this last hour, this last week, is how much money you’ve made. As if you were scared of losing it.”

James smiled. She could read him like a book. That was why he had brought her here. If anyone could make sense of it, it was Sara.

The story came pouring out of him, in flooding relief. He told her everything, kept nothing back. Except his present feelings about the Indians.

Sara felt keenly her brother’s distress, and was not surprised that Andrew was at the heart of it. She wanted to crow in triumph, “I told you so.” She wanted to box her younger brother’s ears for getting involved in the sordid mess, but knew that would get them nowhere.

“You lent Andrew money,” she said. “What Andrew did with it is his business. You’ve been lending him money for years. Did he ever pay a penny of it back?”

James stared at her, trying to come to terms with the simplicity of the statement. It was true. All he had done was lend Andrew a sum, admittedly a very large sum, of money. And that was all.

“Oh, James—there was a trace of sadness in Sara’s voice, but she couldn’t resist the dig—“we’ve been trying to warn you about Andrew for years, Sally and I. Why didn’t you listen?”

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She knew the answer. James had wanted to be part of something grand, something magnificent, and ambition had clouded his mind. Men leave such a mess behind them wherever they go, Sara thought. ‘Tis women have to do the cleaning up.

“The only evidence of anything is in those letters,” she said. “As long as they remain under lock and key, your nose is clean.”

Sara wasn't sure what he was thinking now, but pushed her case. Living in Baltimore, closer to the heart of things than James, tucked away on the other side of the Appalachians, she had heard the stories about Andrew coming out of Washington. He was already an old man when he first became president; now his years in office were said to be making him more and more cantankerous, more vindictive toward his enemies, less and less tolerant of opposition. She wanted James done with Andrew, and she feared his great, soft heart might lead him to actions he would regret.

“Don't give them to Andrew, I beg you. Who knows what the old devil would do with them?”

She knew it was useless to publish them. The resulting scandal would surely harm James, but Andrew, as usual, would find a way to wriggle out of it. And she didn't completely disagree with Andrew on the matter of the Indians.

“As for the Indians,” she continued, as if guessing his moral dilemma, “there's nothing you can do. We can't give back every square inch of land to the bloodthirsty savages, go back where we came from and pretend we were never here.”

She was smiling, he knew, teasing him with the absurdity of the idea.

Then she became serious again. “This isn't the British in Ireland, Jamie.

This was wasted land before we came.”

She hadn't used his pet name since he was a boy, and he almost laughed in relief. Sara's analysis of the settlement of America was so very realistic. He couldn't alter the past; he couldn't unmake history; he couldn't pretend the European migration to America had never happened and send everyone home again. That would create a new race of dispossessed, the children who were born here—they had no other home to go back to. His guilt at the piteous plight of the Indians had clouded his objectivity, and he now saw that he had been an

easy victim to John Coffee's blackmail. John had simply been telling him to shut up, to keep quiet about what he knew. James would oblige.

Still, Sara was wrong. There was something he could do. He could still talk to Andrew, try to persuade him to end the removal of the native people. But he would do so with a considerably lighter heart.

Sally, on the veranda, could see them talking and guessed they were discussing whatever it was that had so been distracting James these last several weeks. She felt a mild twinge of jealousy that her husband should choose to discuss these things with his sister and not with his wife, but it quickly passed. When they walked toward her, Sally could tell, from James's laughter and the energy in his stride, that Sara had resolved whatever problem had been vexing him so. She blessed her sister-in-law for being a practical, pragmatic woman, and waved cheerily to them as they came up the hill.

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in the first week of September the family traveled to Nashville. It took them a full day to cross the river at Muscle Shoals; their carriage had to be ferried across, and then the luggage wagon and the slave cart. Jass spent most of the day at the water's edge, fishing or, with Cap'n Jack, chatting with the black laborers, and from one of them he bought a few freshwater pearls. They were silly, small, irregular things, but the man hadn't wanted much money, and Jass thought they would be a nice gift to some young woman, even Lizzie perhaps, for he was intent on cultivating relationships with girls. Sally and Sassy sheltered from the sun at the inn on the northern shore, so he saw little of Easter. She was wide-eyed at this exotic new adventure of travel-she had never left The Forks before-but she was taking her new duties as Sassy's maid seriously, and hardly left Angel's side.

The Trio had stayed behind at The Forks. They were not invited to the wedding, and were not returning to their school in Nashville. much to Sally's relief. She hated sending these youngsters so far away from home to school, too young, she told herself, for such separation from a mother's watchful eye and warm embrace. A.J. had done it, and Jass, and she'd hated that as much, but they'd had little choice-the Stevens School in Nashville was the nearest suitable institution. Since then, Reverend Sloss had opened his Preparatory Academy in Florence, but that had no facilities for elementary education. James had murmured platitudes about character building, which left Sally entirely unimpressed, and the only consolation Sally could find was that the boys would be under the careful eye of Eleanor. Now, and not before time, thought Sally, the reverend gentleman had extended the age limits of boys he would accept, and the Trio were to go there, as did Jass, and could live at home.

The journey was slow, the pace dictated by the slave cart. The carriage was hot and uncomfortable, jarring their bones as it bounced over the rough roads. Sometimes Jass rode on Morgan, but he didn't want to tire the horse unnecessarily, and mostly kept him tethered to the slave cart. Then Jass preferred to ride on the box with Samuel, the coachman, who claimed to have covered all this territory before, in the few short days of his freedom, when actually he had never left the outskirts of Florence, and knew the road only because he had driven the coach to Nashville and back many times.

Ephraim drove the luggage wagon, and Easter and Angel were with Cap'n Jack in the slave cart.

Each evening they would stop while it was still light at travelers' hotels, around which small settlements had grown, and Jass was allowed to join his father in after-dinner conversations with the older men or, in the hour before sunset, free to explore the surroundings.

Jass had made the journey many times, but as a boy, going to and coming from his school, and he now saw the adventure with a young man's eyes. This is still the frontier, he thought, and it thrilled him and horrified him.

He saw a slave being mercilessly lashed in public for some hurt, real or imagined, to his master, and he had turned away, for it provoked sub-

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conscious memories of another lashing he had seen, as a boy, to a man who was now his friend and walked beside him. Once he saw a white man shoot another to death with a pistol, in full view outside the hotel, for what Cap'n Jack, talking to other slaves, discovered was a question of honor.

Conversely, he experienced hospitality from almost everyone he met, a sense of welcome to a stranger, which his father assured him was the nature of these people. He knew his family occupied a privileged position-because of his father's status, because they were guests traveling to an important occasion, and because they had made the journey so often that many of the innkeepers and their families remembered thembut even so, the generosity that was extended to them warmed his heart.

The later discussions with older men, in his father's company, both intrigued and bored him. Alfred and Gracie's wedding was on everyone's lips, a source of amusement to some, evidence of the increasing uppitiness of niggers to others, and this led to discussion of the man Jass called Uncle Andrew, who, however, was not related to him and whom he had never met.

Here in the West, Andrew's actions as president had only increased his already legendary status. He was seen as champion of the little man, the settler, the battling individual. People here believed him dedicated to enfeebling the bureaucracy in Washington, reducing the undue influence of the industrial Northeast over their lives, and by removing the federal deposits from it, curbing the outrageous power the centralized bank had previously enjoyed. Only a few speculators and businessmen dissented from this view, and then vehemently.

It had always been the same, his father explained. Andrew was an extraordinary man, capable of arousing violent passions in people, both toward him and against him.

Above all else, Andrew was seen as the salvation of the white settler from the bloodthirsty savages, the consensus being that the sooner the land was rid of all Indians, the better life would be. It puzzled Jass that his father would walk away every time this subject was raised, nor would he discuss it with Jass.

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Easter had hoped to see more of Jass on this journey than she had done all summer, but she knew something had happened in their relationship, something he had to come to terms with for himself. He didn't ignore her, he still visited the weaving house, but now he kept a distance between them, as if determined to avoid actual physical contact with her, and she missed the easy familiarity they used to enjoy. Here on the journey, when he was riding Morgan, he'd trot beside the slave cart for a while, pointing out new things to her, but Angel and Cap'n Jack were an obvious, inhibiting influence to any intimacy between them.

At night she'd be too busy to see him, for she and Angel had to unpack the trunk, prepare the clothes for the morning, and see to their mistress's comforts before they could even begin to think about their own. They ate and slept in the dingy slave accommodations attached to the hotels, and while she enjoyed listening to the slaves of other travelers, she was too shy to voice opinions of her own. Up from well before sunrise to long after dark, drowsy on some uncomfortable cot in a lousy communal shed, Easter decided that traveling was an overrated experience and longed for the comforts of the little shack that was home.

At a small village on the last night before reaching their destination, James took Jass to a revival meeting in a field nearby. the settlement being too small for a church. James, although he believed devoutly in God, was not a deeply religious man and adhered to no particular church, but the emotional ferocity that the frontier preachers could arouse fascinated him, and he thought the experience would be interesting for Jass.

The meeting was already in progress when they arrived. Some fifty people

attended, country folk, poor whites, gathered in from outlying farms and settlements. Many of them had traveled many miles to find some relief from the abject hardships they daily endured, some promise of future glory. Simply clad as they were, with weathered faces and gnarled, knotty hands, Jass could not imagine that these austere people would provide any of the exotic entertainment his father had promised. He had not reckoned on the Preacher man.

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He heard the Preacher before he saw him, a voice thundering at heaven, but in a language that Jass had no knowledge of, and could not understand. He was silent as they reached the clearing, and all heads were bowed in prayer. The Preacher was standing on a cart, his Bible clenched in his fist. A couple of lanterns tied to sticks in the ground provided small illumination and ghostly shadows. Jass could see some spectators watching from the surrounding trees, a few black faces among them, but his father led him closer to the cart, the center of things.

Suddenly, the Preacher looked up. "You are all sinners," the Preacher yelled, and a murmur of agreement ran through his congregation. It unnerved Jass, for in the dim light he thought the Preacher was staring directly at him.

"Liars! Swindlers! Hypocrites!" the Preacher cried. The assenting murmur of response from the accused was louder now.

"Fornicators! "

Jass blushed. He knew what the word fornicator meant. Wesley used it all the time, and while Jass had never had actual physical contact with a woman, the private fantasies he sometimes enjoyed seemed just as reprehensible. He wondered if his father knew, or could guess, for his guilt must surely be branded on his brow.

"And as sinners you are damned," the Preacher shouted again.

"Yes! Yes!" a responsive voice yelled back.

“There is only one way to redemption,” the Preacher continued, waving the Good Book of direction in the air. “God is your only salvation, and your only path to Him is the blood of the Lamb!”

Now the Preacher shouted again in that alien tongue, and another man in the crowd called something in response, but it seemed to Jass to be in a different language. He wondered if the two understood each other.

It made no difference. It wouldn't have mattered if the entire sermon had been delivered in tongues-and much of it was because even if the sounds were incomprehensible to others, Jass knew what they meant, and knew they were all directed exclusively at him.

The throbbing voice of the Preacher touched some deep well

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of unchanneled, teenage emotion in Jass, and he was gathered into the mounting ecstasy. He moved forward, away from his father, perhaps to hear the Preacher better, perhaps to be part of the now swaying throng. The Preacher warned fire and brimstone, and the crowd shivered from the heat.

The Preacher cried hell and damnation, and the crowd simply cried. The Preacher held out the promise of salvation, and someone fainted in relief.

The voice roared on. Jass was not an individual now but an engulfed fraction of a mounting collective frenzy. The Preacher jumped down from the cart, and came into the midst of it, ranting eye of a hysterical cyclone, laying his hands on swooning bodies, casting demons out of a babbling fannhand, and yet seeming to direct a torrential energy on Jass, as if demanding from him some ultimate submission. Jass was euphoric.

The unspeakable happened. Jass was incredulous. How could the vile monster assert itself here, in this exquisite company? The dreadful hardness was incontrovertible proof to Jass that he was guilty of sin beyond all reckoning, and he fell to his knees at the Preacher's feet, weeping for forgiveness of something he could not even name, and begging for salvation from his accursed path.

Then it all seemed to stop. The Preacher, having done his work, gave a few final, less extravagant admonitions; the congregation got up, dusted themselves down, resumed their earlier, self-contained composure, and departed, on carts, horseback, and foot, into the night.

Jass looked at James a little sheepishly, wondering what his father would think of it all. James didn't say very much. He walked his son back to the hotel, asking only a few mild questions about the evening, but Jass couldn't shake the conviction that his father was laughing. At him.

Sally was furious. A devout Presbyterian, she had an aversion to all extravagant forms of worship and had tried to stop James from taking Jass to the meeting. She rounded on her husband in fury and demanded to know why he hadn't stopped Jass from taking part.

"He was being saved %for Jesus," James responded calmly. "I didn't think it was my place to interfere." Jass saw the

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twinkle in his father's eye, and knew for sure what he had guessed. James thought the whole evening was the best fun. Sally knew it too, because she also saw the twinkle, and ordered Jass to bed so she could have a few words with James alone.

She came to him a little later, before he fell asleep, sat on the edge of his bed and talked to him calmly, whispering, because Sassy was slumbering in the next bed.

"I am very angry with your father," she said softly. "I have no love for these evangelist religions. They bring comfort to a number of the poor country folk, I know, but for me God is to be found in quiet contemplation, not in public display."

She paused, not sure quite how to phrase what she wanted to say, for it didn't pertain only to God.

"If you have truly found Jesus, of course, I couldn't be happier for you, but I

wasn't aware that you had ever lost him." She kissed his forehead.

"Always remember that emotions can be easily manipulated, and that love is a thing of the mind as well as the heart." She wondered if he understood what she was trying to say, but decided to leave it at that.

"Good night, my darling," she said, and left the room. Jass mumbled a good night, and turned to face the wall.

James was awake, lying in bed reading, when she came into their room. She was still cross with him.

She began to undress in silence. James put down his book. "He'll get over it," he offered, to make the peace. "It was a good experience for him."

"I'm sure it was an experience," she said. "Whether it was good or not is a matter of opinion."

She sat at the dressing table to put on her nightcap. She didn't want to be near James, not yet. Not until he said he was sorry.

"I'm sorry," he said. The laughter in his eyes betrayed him. "I'm very angry with you," Sally replied, but she could never be very angry with him for very long. Besides, her initial temper was being replaced by curiosity.

"I can't imagine it happening to Jass," she said.

James, to whom the whole evening had been amusing but

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of little consequence, could think only of a platitude.

"Still waters run deep." He patted the space beside him. "Come to bed."

Sally finished her toilette, and did as she was bidden, snuggling into her husband's arms.

“Do you really think Lizzie will be suitable for him, one day?” It was the first time she had raised the subject of Lizzie with James.

He was careful, sensing Sally’s dislike of the idea. “She’s going to be very pretty,” he offered.

“She’s so very young, and so very brittle,” Sally said. James nodded.

“She’ll grow up, grow out of it.”

Sara’s realistic appraisal of the situation with Andrew had dulled James’s eagerness to settle on the concept, at least, of an early union for Jass, but it was still there.

“I hope Jass enjoys his youth,” he told his wife. “But if anything should happen to him, or to any of the other three, or to me-”

He didn’t refer to the loss of A.J., but Sally knew what he meant. The succession to the inheritance was paramount to families like theirs.

She smiled at her husband. “Nothing’s going to happen to you for a very long time,” she said, lovingly.

James looked into her eyes. “I surely hope not,” he said. He held her in his arms, kissed her full on the mouth, and she surrendered to his loving embrace.

“Hush,” she murmured when her mouth was free. “Don’t wake the children.”

Jass stared at the bedroom wall. He couldn’t believe it! He guessed from the rhythmic noise of the bedsprings in the next room that his parents were doing-that-right then and there. How could they, after what he’d been through?

He rolled over in his bunk, away from the wall, and tried to block out the sounds and come to terms with what it was he’d been through. Away from the Preacher’s influence, he didn’t feel very much more certain of what God might be than at the start of the evening. Had he found Jesus?

He wasn’t sure. He knew he’d found something, even if it was only a rock-

solid determination that he was going to have greater

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discipline over his body in future. But was that all?

What was the love of Jesus? What was the love of God? What was God? He didn't know. Confusing questions about the relationship of God to man assailed him. If there was only one God, why were there so many religions? If God was love, why was there war? If killing was forbidden in the commandments, how could God forgive soldiers? How could you take an eye for an eye and turn the other cheek at the same time? Even though his teachers had always given ready answers to these seeming contradictions, now Jass began to doubt their authority. If fornication was so wrong, why was the urge to do it so overwhelming? If it was wrong to do the unspeakable, why had He made it so pleasurable? Some of the younger slaves did it too, he knew, because he'd heard them giggling about it.

And what about the blacks? Where was the dividing line between animals, blacks-or come to that, redskins-and white people? Wesley had talked of a slave girl who was as white as his sister, and two of their own slaves were only a kind of pale yellow, so why were they black, and why didn't they have souls, as the Reverend Sloss insisted? If Ham was the first nigger, why didn't he have a soul like his brothers? If niggers didn't have souls, why did so many of them believe in God? And how did God choose? If Wesley, or anyone, did a slave girl and she had a baby, that baby wouldn't have a soul, but when he got married to a white girl and had a baby, that child would. Did souls descend only through the white maternal line? Were mothers that sacred?

In that case, if Jass had found Jesus, as the Preacher claimed, why was his mother so angry? Perhaps it was this that caused the greatest confusion of all, for Jass had loved Jesus all his life, and as his mother had pointed out, how could something be found if it had never been lost? And if his mother was right about that, then what about the other thing? If it was true, if the Preacher, whom he didn't know from Adam, had manipulated his emotions so easily, what happened when you fell in love with someone? If you loved someone with all your heart, how much control did the adored one have over you? Obviously quite a lot in

my case, Jass thought. He would have to tread very carefully around girls from now on.

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He was tired. The emotional outpouring of the evening had exhausted him, and he felt drained and vitalized all at the same time. He drifted to sleep in the reassuring knowledge that he had certainly experienced something, whatever it was, that was somehow part of growing up, for the questions that were concerning him now were not ones he had ever asked himself before.

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On the afternoon of the fifth day they arrived at their destination, the slave cart having slowed their progress, and went straight to cousin John Kirkman's house, where they were lodging.

Town, Aunt Eleanor told them, was full; there was no room to be had at any inn, lodging house, farm, or private house in the district. Sarah had scandalized the South with her invitation, and consequently anyone who thought they were anybody and hadn't been invited had done everything in their power to ensure that they were. Plantation Massas who would have a black whipped to death without turning a hair had pulled every string they could, political and social, to watch two nigras jump the broom. Eleanor's eyes danced with glee, and she laughed until tears rolled down her cheeks.

Jass was fascinated by his aging aunt. She had been merely a daunting woman with a slight mustache when he first became aware of her as a child, but he had come to know her well in the years he spent at school in Nashville, for she had charge of him then. At first he had been unable to reconcile his father's funny stories of her when young. He couldn't imagine this forbidding woman in black bornbazine as a redheaded revolutionary in Dublin married to a great Irish

martyr, but because of that past, it was with her that he first raised some of the troubling questions that Cap'n Jack had put in his mind.

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He contrived to be alone with her in her pretty garden and, somewhat diffidently, asked her about slavery-.

Aunt Eleanor had snorted in derision. "Half this socalled Southern aristocracy is just jumped-up bog peasants who've made their pile on the backs of men they don't even pay a wage. "

She was no freethinker, however. "I've no love for the nigras, Jass," she continued. "Dirty, shiftless, and lazy, most of I em, who'd cut your throat for a shillin', and should have been left in the jungle where they belong.

But if a man works, he should be paid for it."

Jass was confused. "We own slaves," he said.

Eleanor smiled ruefully. "And so do I,- she said, with a wistfulness that Jass didn't understand. She owned some house slaves, one of whom, Joshua, was digging in the vegetable patch.

"When I first came here," Eleanor explained, "I wouldn't have a bar of it.

I thought it was a disgrace against nature, and I was shocked that Jamie-your father-had taken to practicing it. But it was the custom, and life was hard then, awful hard-you young folk have it easy-and in the end it was simpler to swim with the tide than against it. And it didn't bother your poor, dear Uncle Thomas, God rest his soul."

A sadness had settled on her. "I often asked myself what Oliver—

She looked at Jass and realized that probably he had no idea who Oliver was. "My first husband," she explained, and memory of him fluttered in her heart.

She looked at the gardener. The sadness vanished, and as if to complete her case against herself, she yelled to him.

“Joshua! Put your back into it, man!” The voice was stentorian. “I could have dug that whole patch by now.”

Joshua muttered something inaudible and carried on at his usual pace.

Eleanor looked at Jass. and there was a smile of selfmockery twinkling in her eye.

“At least I know what I am,” she said. “Which is more than can be said for most of these Southern kings in their cotton castles. “

An old campaigner from a lost war, she still had advice for the young.

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“Never give your nigras reason to hate you, Jass,” she said. “Because one day they’ll have their revenge. It is the nature of things,”

So they became friends. She never had direct answers for Jass on moral or political questions he raised but would put the various sides of an argument, and encourage him to arrive at his own conclusions. The only subject on which she never equivocated was the British in Ireland, and she would lecture him for hours on the evil of their cause.

“Why didn’t you stay and fight them?” Jass asked once, and Eleanor looked at him sharply, but her reply was surprisingly reasonable.

“It’s terrible hard to be wed to a man who gives his life to a great cause,” she said. “And realize that his dyin’ made not one jot or tittle of difference to anything. The Irish were still starvin’, and the British still lived off the fat of their land. So I came here. And look at me now.”

She laughed again, a vulgar, raucous laugh. “All piss and wind, I suppose.”

Jass blushed scarlet. He'd never heard a woman use that word before.

"And I met your Uncle Thomas," she said gently, "and I had a wonderful life with him."

Now she was old and frail, and could walk only with the help of canes or, preferably to her, the arms of a strong young man. She was pragmatic about her declining years and intended to move to Baltimore, with Sara to look after her. "To die," Eleanor said cheerfully, "looking at old Ireland."

"You'll live for years yet," James retorted.

"I may," Aunt Eleanor nodded. The smile faded from her face. "God forbid."

She would sell this house and cousin John would move to Florence. It is the end of the Nashville years, James thought. A chapter in our lives is closing. Florence is the future now. The South.

The wedding was not until the coming Sunday, with a welcoming barbecue the day before, but the week was to be a hectic social calendar of luncheons, levees, and soirees. The gathering of the clans, James explained to Jass.

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Slaves had been heating water all day, and now the women bathed in the outhouse, while James and Jass used the creek on the edge of the property.

After a week on the road, they felt filthy, and Sally longed to let down her hair and have Angel examine it for any lice picked up in the tawdry travelers' hostels. The visitors from Florence crammed the house. Jass was sleeping in the attic with his young second cousin, and they had a jolly time, the boy delighting in taunting Jass's authority by giving voice to all the new cuss words he had teamed, and juvenile allusions to bodily functions. James and Sally were in the guest bedroom, Sally was sleeping with the Kirkman girls, Easter and Angel

were sharing a cramped outhouse with the female slaves, while Cap'n Jack, Samuel, and Ephraim bunked in the bam.

The next morning, James took Jass to Colonel Elliot's stud farm, although really it belonged to James, and the colonel was in his employ. Jass was allowed to trot Leviathan around the ring, and thrilled to the beauty and power of the animal. He was even more pleased that his father included him in the business discussions, and he started to feel a sense of the scope of what would one day be his. Most of the talk was about improving the bloodlines of the horses, and Jass shared the general excitement when James agreed that the colonel could begin negotiations to purchase Glencoe, the most famous stallion in England.

That afternoon, the Donelsons gave a formal reception for those out-of-townners who had arrived, and Jass was exhilarated, treated for the first time as his father's heir. He was only slightly disappointed that Lizzie wasn't there, as the Perkinses were not arriving till Thursday. It was the first time that Jass understood the size and complexity of the network of Southern families, either blood-or business-related. His father's description of the clans being gathered seemed exact, for cousins who had only heard of each other had the chance to meet, daughters of great estates had to be introduced to potential suitors, new friendships were formed and old relationships elaborated on.

Births, marriages, and deaths had to be enumerated, the former congratulated, and the latter condoled. For the most part, this followed a rigorous recitation of accepted ritual, but Jass was enchanted by old Mr.

Morrissey, a distant friend of his

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mother's and. wealthy associate of his father's. Morrissey's brother, an acknowledged rogue, had disappeared to Texas after a shady financial scandal. Now news of his death in some settlers' battle with the Mexicans in Texas had reached the family, which somewhat redeemed his honor. But old Mr.

Morrissey, who was ancient of days, acutely deaf, and rode in a Bath chair

pushed by a slave, would have none of it.

“I’m so sorry about Nicholas,” Sally yelled into his ear trumpet. “Whatever for?” Mr. Morissey yelled back, assuming the rest of the world to be as hard of hearing as he. “The man was a scoundrel. I trust he met an unpleasant end and is dancing at the sharp end of Satan’s pitchfork.” Jass giggled, and turned away.

Easter, watching from the sidelines in the protective shadow of Cap’n Jack and Angel, was overawed by it all. She had never seen such a parade of obvious wealth or felt such blatant and innate power accumulated in the hands of a very small group of people. Receptions at The Forks of Cypress were grand, but paled to insignificance compared with this. Open landaus delivered streams of superbly attired men and their richly dressed wives.

Beautiful young women in gorgeous gowns were everywhere, most of them dancing around Jass, Easter thought, and realized that this was his natural world. Hope of his being any kind of constant figure in her life was limited to one certainty: He was her Massa and she his slave.

Even the other slaves present inhibited her, for many of them looked and behaved as if they were far grander than those who owned them. Many were almost as well dressed as their Massas, and their manners were flawless.

Parson Dick might have been confident in their company, but Easter felt like a field hand and saw her father as a country bumpkin. Easter looked at her simple linen frock and determined that she would wear only her muslin when she went out again.

Angel hardly left Sally’s side, and Cap’n Jack had old friends to talk to, so Easter was left on her own. Standing under a tree, she was wishing the ground would open and swallow her up, when she heard a voice.

“Ain’t you the prettiest thing?”

An extremely handsome young slave was staring at her. Tall and dignified, only a few years older than herself, he might

have been the stuff of Easter's dreams if they had not been running in another direction.

Easter was mortified, and had no idea what to say.

"Cat got yo' tongue?" the young man asked, still smiling. "I's Reuben, I's with the Murphys of Virginia."

It was an invitation to introduce herself, she knew, but Easter, after another glance at the sophisticated company, was petrified. So she ran away and found a hiding place behind the big house, and didn't come out until she heard Angel and Cap'n Jack calling for tier because it was time to leave. She never told them why she had disappeared so abruptly, but she determined she was not going to spend the rest of the week in such misery, and wondered if Jessica, the Kirkman inaid, had a dress she could borrow.

Cap'n Jack had not vet seen Alfred, but James gave him permission to do so that evening, and, if necessary, to spend the night at the Hermitage.

The Kirkman house was only three miles from the Hermitage, but Cap'n Jack took a long detour through town. He thrilled to see how Nashville had grown.

There were even stone buildings now, and streets he hardly recognized.

Imposing houses with wel I-establ i shed gardens stood on blocks of land that had been farms not so many years ago. Well dressed, walking alone in what had become a place he didn't know and scarcely remembered, Cap'n Jack was able to pretend, for a while, that he was a free man, with his paper of manumission in his pocket instead of his Massa's travel pass.

Little had changed at the Hermitage, though. The gardens were still beautifully tended, and the weathering of the years had aged the house and given it a sense of permanence, as if it had always stood there, and always would. Still, Cap'n Jack felt a little unsure of himself. It was late, nearly twilight, and none of the gardeners was working, nor anyone who might have remembered him. If it were not for the few lamps burning inside the house, he would have thought it deserted. He wasn't sure where Alfred would be. In the old days, the slave lived in the big house with his Massa, but now that Washington was his home and he

was only a visitor here, Cap'n Jack wondered if he should go to the slave quarters first.

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A wheezy chuckle solved the problem for him.

“Why, yo’ ol’-!” It was Alfred, coming out to greet him from the kitchen.

He hadn’t changed much. Although his hair was gray, his face was unwrinkled, and his eyes sparkled with welcome. Cap’n Jack felt an enormous sense of relief. Whatever else had changed in his world, Alfred was a constant.

“Yo’ young buzzard!” he called as happily, though Alfred was several years his senior. The men shook hands warmly, and embraced, and Alfred led him to the kitchen to eat.

The family, young Massa Andrew and Missy Sarah, were out visiting, and had taken Gracie with them, so they had the place to themselves. They gossiped about old times and new, and of the cooling of the friendship between their two Massas.

“Ain’t evuh gwine be like it was,” Alfred said. “Massa Andrew old, an’ he think yo’ Massa done him wrong.”

His mind was full of his Massa, and the gossip from Washington.

“Weren’t fight to come,” he said. -01’ Massa Andrew sick; he need me there.

Ain’t nobody else c’n look after him like me.”

He turned away, as if worried about Andrew, but then chuckled.

“He tole me I had to git wed here,” he said. “It yo’ home, Alfred, he said.

It’s where yo’ gwine die and be buried; it’s fittin’ yo’ be wed there too.”

He paused again.

“I don’t like leavin’ him there on his ownsome,” he said. “He old.”

The cook had fed them and ignored them, but now she roared that she was sick of the pair of them cluttering up her kitchen. Alfred roared back at her, but winked at Cap’n Jack, and they said their good nights to her, and made their way to the little room in the slave quarters where Alfred was staying.

“Still got my room in the big house,” he said, “but all these folk in town, weren’t nowhere’s for Gracie, so she in it. I in here.”

He winked. “Got summat else, too.” He rummaged in his trunk and found a bottle of moonshine.

“Speshul occashun,” he chuckled wheezily.

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Cap’n Jack laughed in anticipation. Usually they were forbidden to drink liquor, but Alfred’s special status made it unlikely they would be reprimanded if caught. They could get drunk, just the two of them, and for this night at least, it would be like the old days.

And it was, it was, for a while. Warmed by the liquor, they talked of times past, and of Gracie, Alfred’s bride-to-be, who had astonished everyone when she accepted his offer of marriage, for she was twenty years younger than he.

“Glad I waited all these years,” Alfred sighed happily.

They were drunk now. Alfred’s smile faded, and he looked at Cap’n Jack.

“Time you got hitched agin,” he said, “afore you’re too ol’.”

“Never found the right woman.” Cap’n Jack didn’t want to think about Annie, and had another swig of moonshine.

Alfred wasn't easily distracted. "Only time Massa James evuh did you wrong," he said, "sellin' Annie away."

... T weren't the Massa, 't were the overseer," Cap'n Jack insisted. "An' I got Easter to remember her by."

Alfred shook his head and laughed at the lie.

"Massa's in charge," he said. "Give overseer the aut'ority. All white Massas the same, don't give a hoot 'bout niggers, cept to work themselves to the grave for 'em. An' beyond."

Cap'n Jack was puzzled, but thought it was the liquor. Death was the end of their bondage. Not even white Massas had authority over death.

Alfred had another swig of moonshine. He struggled to his feet.

"Oops," he said. "I ain't 'zackly my nat'chrel self."

He giggled, but there was no humor in it. "C'm here." He beckoned Cap'n Jack outside.

They wended through the gardens, supporting each other, and giggling in whispers. Alfred stopped to relieve himself, and looked at the stars.

... Tain't fair," he said, and although Cap'n Jack was not sure what he meant, he agreed with his friend.

Alfred led the way to the little cemetery. A pillared monument had been built in the center of it, and they stood near it.

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1401, Missus," said Alfred, unnecessarily, for Cap'n Jack could read the inscription.

Alfred pointed to the ground beside it. "Ready fo' ol' Massa," he said.

"ne ol' devil gwine be buried here, next to her. "

"But he won't go to heaven," Cap'n Jack chuckled.

Alfred was not in a laughing mood. "If'n he wants to he will, and he wants to, coz that where she is."

He pointed to a plot of ground only a few yards away.

"An I gwine be buried there!" he said in sudden fury. "Massa says! You ain't evuh gwine get away from me, Alfred, he says. You gwine be buried right near me, so's I can yell fo' yo' when I needs yo'."

He turned on his friend.

... Tain't fair! I cain't get way from him in life and I cain't get away from him when I's dead."

His mood changed abruptly, and tears came to his eyes.

... Tain't fair," he said again. "Massas say they own us niggers body and soul."

He looked at his future grave site, and shook his head.

"An' they do," he said. "They own us livin' an' they own us dead."

33

On Saturday evening, the great Southern families assembled in Nashville descended like royalty on the Hermitage.

Easter was astonished. She had thought the parties during the week were wonderful, but they were only rehearsals compared with this. Coachmen and footmen were wigged and liveried. The women had saved their finest evening

gowns for this occasion, and were aglitter with jewels, the men all in formal evening wear. Slaves had been borrowed from surrounding plantations to line the driveway with flambeaux, although there was still light in the sky. A slave choir, assembled

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on the lawn outside the house, serenaded the guests as they arrived.

Despite many reservations as to the reason for Sarah Jackson's invitation, the tacit consensus was that this should be a glittering social occasion. The widowed President Jackson did much entertaining in Washington, but he was old, and even though Emily Donelson did her best as hostess, the affairs were boorish, redolent of the smoking room and the stag party. There was a social vacuum in the land, and who better than the glorious Sarah to fill it, and transfer it here? She wasn't a Yankee, and she lived in Nashville, and visions of that city becoming the cultural capital of the nation filled many matrons' hearts. Nashville was close to Memphis, Louisville and Lexington, and even New Orleans, close enough to all the new cities on the western side of the Appalachians, and Atlanta was not too far away. It was some distance to the coastal cities of Charleston and Savannah, of course, but it served them right, as many of the newly rich of Alabama and Mississippi found those cities to be insufferably elitist about position and money.

That it was even farther from the large Northern cities, and half a continent from Boston, delighted them. Too often, they'd had to make the arduous journey to Washington or New York or Philadelphia for politically important social occasions, and now the supper would be on another table.

Sarah's wedding, for no white thought of it as Alfred and Gracie's, was a chance to show the world the triumph of elegant Southern sophistication, and how well the niggers were treated, and if any of those niggers got uppity and forgot their place they'd get a good thrashing.

There were two reception lines in the garden, one for the whites and one for the blacks. There were two of everything, one for the whites and one for the blacks,

and woe betide any nigger who crossed the line, although any white could do so with impunity.

Sally laughed as the Alabama Jacksons descended from their carriage and went to the receiving line.

“I feel positively dowdy,” she said, although she looked wonderful in the dark-blue taffeta gown, and probably knew it.

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There was surprisingly little confusion, for all knew their places. The white’s were greeted by Sarah and Andrew junior. The slaves who had been invited were greeted by Alfred and Gracie, and the slaves who had not been invited but were attending their Massas and Missys were directed to the kitchen, where they would be fed. Easter was attending, not invited, but Alfred had specifically asked to meet her, so now she stood in the black receiving line with her father and gawked at all about her.

Jass could see Lizzie already in the garden, for the Perkinses had been among the first to arrive, and she looked beautiful. He knew she’d seen him too, because she tossed her head and pretended she hadn’t.

“James-Sally-oh, thank God you came.” He heard Sarah’s laughing, lilting voice, was surprised to find they were at the head of the line. He’d been wondering if he should give Lizzie the freshwater pearls or save them for someone else.

Sally was laughing too. “This is quite a hornet’s nest you’ve stirred up,”

she said to Andrew junior, and Sarah giggled again.

“Don’t blame me; this was all her idea,” he said, and shook hands warmly with James.

“Well, Alfred’s been with your father for longer than anyone can remember,

we had to make a fuss,” Sarah said to her husband, and turned to Sally again. “Isn’t it fun?”

They knew Sassy, but not Jass. He was presented, and was fascinated by Sarah’s bubbling personality and sense of humor, and suddenly Jass knew why she’d decided on such a celebration. She wanted fun; she wanted to make a little dent in a society that Jass already suspected could be smotheringly smug. For no reason, Jass laughed, and without knowing what he was laughing at, Sarah laughed with him. She is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Jass thought, and cursed his fortune. If she were not older and married, he would have immediately given her his pearls. Moving away with his family, Jass caught sight of Easter cowering in the black receiving line, and laughed again, and told himself he was going to have a good time.

Easter couldn’t bear the idea that she was about to meet the famous Alfred, her father’s dearest, perhaps his only, friend,

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and right-hand man to the president. She tried to hide behind Cap’n Jack, but to no avail.

“This be Easter, Annie’s girl,” she heard her father say, pulling her forward. Easter caught a glimpse of a stern face appraising her, and sank into a deep curtsy.

“Chile’s pretty,” she heard him say.

“Chile’s scared!” Now it was a woman who spoke, a warm, welcoming voice.

Easter looked up and saw that the woman standing next to the stern man was glaring at him and smiling at her, all at once.

“An’ no wonder, yo’ starin’ at her like yo’ stare at me when I done summat’ wrong. Here, girl, Easter, ain’t it?”

The woman helped her up. "I's Gracie," she said. "An' I's the one done fixin' to marry this gristly ol' turkey."

Everyone laughed, and suddenly Easter wasn't shy anymore. "Yo' stan' by me," said Gracie, "and help me 'member the names a all these folk I ain't never met and ain't evuh gwine meet again."

Easter was happy. She had a job to do; she wouldn't be left on her own as she had been at most of the other parties. She stood beside Gracie, glowing. If she wasn't exactly mistress of the mansion, she was in a position of some eminence.

Alfred looked at her approvingly. "Chile's pretty," he said again to Cap'n Jack. "An' you stan' by me, Cap'n Jack, yo' my bes' man. "

Having been received, the guests assembled on the lawn. There were long tables set out, groaning with food and punch, at one end, for the whites, and other long tables, complaining rather than groaning, and with lemonade not punch, at the other end, for the blacks.

There was one band, but two dancing areas. The fiddlers struck up a tune, and the whites danced with the whites, the blacks danced with the blacks.

Jass looked for Lizzie, who seemed to dance with every young man but him.

Easter kept her eyes on Jass. Sally sat with Mrs. Perkins and some other friends on the sidelines, while James mingled with his many business associates.

After an hour or so, the band took a break, and the slave choir assembled to sing spirituals for the guests while they ate.

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Listening to the sweet music as he was helping himself to some food, something puzzled Jass. It was silly that niggers don't have souls, he thought, yet

they're encouraged to sing about heaven. But he was hungry, and the smell of spit-roasted hog distracted him.

Easter was in line at the black table, piling her plate with food. Or rather, she was a fixture at the black table because she was bored again and the food tasted wonderful and eating helped pass the time. She was also enchanted by some of the conversations around her.

"Why, this sho' am beautiful," said an elegantly dressed slave. "Sweetest chicken I evuh et," said another. Easter giggled, and suddenly she longed to be at home, in her simple house with her simple friends. This world was too complicated for her.

"Ain't this the prettiest night?" she heard someone say, and knew who it was. Eyes wide, mouth full, she turned to Reuben.

"But not as pretty as you," he said, and winked at her. Easter was shocked, not because he winked but because he winked at her. Surely he didn't think she was pretty?

"Don't believe I evuh heard yo' name?" He really was very handsome, Easter decided.

"My name is Easter," she said, in fair imitation of Lizzie. "And I am with the Jacksons."

"My, my," Reuben said, suitably impressed. "The Nashville Jacksons, of course?"

"Why, no," she said, pleased with herself. "Massa James Jackson of Alabama is my Massa, and I think I hear my Missy callin' me now."

She walked away, feeling that she'd handled him a lot better this time, and went looking for Jass.

Who was looking at Lizzie. Sitting in a little arbor, surrounded by enthusiastic young men of Jass's age, Lizzie looked wonderful. She seemed to have grown up a little over the summer, and had taken particular care with her dress for this occasion, palest blue, like her eyes, with elegant frills in flowing muslin. She

occasion, palest blue, like her eyes, with elegant ruffles in flowing muslin. She was handling her beaux with great aplomb, and Jass decided he would not give her the pearls. They were not good

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enough. That lovely neck demanded emeralds or rubies at least, if not diamonds.

"I declare, Miss Lizzie, you grow more lovely every time I see you," a pimply young man said to her.

"Why, thank you, Chester. You must be nearly old enough to shave by now."

Lizzie simpered like lemon.

Chester blushed, and the others laughed. Another young man stepped up to her execution block.

"I've been shaving for years now, Miss Lizzie," he said in his deepest voice.

"Then you should try to grow a mustache, Anthony," Lizzie purred. "it might make you look a little older."

The others laughed at Anthony now, led by Chester. Lizzie looked around for another victim and saw Jass.

"Is that the Jackson boy I see over there?"

Jass sprang forward. "Yes, Miss Lizzie," he offered.

"Fetch me a little more chicken," Lizzie hardly looked at him, and waved her empty plate in the air. Jass grabbed it.

"I'd be delighted, Miss Lizzie, if you'll save a place for me on your dance card tomorrow." Jass had decided to bargain.

"Why, sir, I told you, my card is full." Lizzie was better at haggling, and sighed and looked helpless. "But I would die for a little more chicken."

Jass had no counteroffer, and capitulated. “Right away, Miss Lizzie,” he said, and turned toward the food table.

“An uppity boy, but useful,” Lizzie told her swains, and they all laughed at Jass now.

As Jass piled chicken on Lizzie’s plate, Easter, who had overheard Lizzie’s last remark, sidled up to him.

“Why yo’ wastin’ yo’ time with her?” she demanded. “She’s jus’ playin’ with yo’, laughing at yo’.”

Jass looked at her, and, his vision blurred by the heady company, he saw only a bothersome slave girl in a cheap frock. She had no place in this world, his world. She had no idea of the complex forces that were driving him to a friendship, at least, with Lizzie, and perhaps something more.

How could he make her understand? He didn’t understand it all himself.

“Keep your place, Easter,” he told her sharply. “You’re too young, you wouldn’t understand.”

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He walked away. If they’d been in the weaving house, Easter might have hit him, or at least put a double dose of iodine on his cuts, but they were here, in public, and anyway, things had changed between them. She had never seen that look in his eyes before, and it frightened her, because she saw she was irrelevant to him. She had been reminded, by him, of her true place in his life, and it hurt.

The band had started to play again, and couples were dancing. Easter wandered on the edge of it, longing for some young man, preferably Jass, to come along and sweep her onto the dance floor. A young man did, but it wasn’t Jass.

“May I have the honor?” Reuben asked, offering his arm. Easter hesitated for only a moment.

“Why, suh, I believe yo’ may,” she said, and smiled her most dazzling smile. He led her onto the dance floor, and they danced and danced, and Easter put aside her cares and had a wonderful time, although she had on one occasion to tell Reuben very sharply to keep his hands where they belonged. But she could not rid her mind of Jass.

Almost everybody had a good time that night, except James. He had been in a party mood, looking forward to an evening of fun and laughter, a little too much to drink, a few dances with Sally, and good talk with friends and associates.

He’d had fun at the beginning, and laughed a good deal. He’d danced with Sally and had drunk a little too much. Perhaps because of the drink, the talks with his male friends depressed him.

It was only natural, he supposed, that the most frequent topic of conversation was Andrew. It was Andrew’s house, Andrew’s slave who was getting married, and Andrew’s party in absentia, but there was more.

Andrew strode through all their lives like a colossus, and gave the younger men a sense of what it must have been like in the glory days of the Revolutionary War, which some of the older men present remembered, and the War of 1812, which younger men could recall. It was Andrew who had paid off the national debt incurred in those wars. It was Andrew who had broken the power of the central bank. It was Andrew who was the champion of their

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right to rule themselves, it was Andrew who understood the power and purpose of the original Constitution, because he personally knew many of the men who had framed it, and it was Andrew, single-handedly, many believed, who was ridding the country of the red-skinned savage, by whatever means necessary, fair or foul.

OF TOWN.

It was there that so many of the arguments began, old arguments that James had heard so many times before and wanted so desperately not to hear again.

It was generally agreed that most of Andrew's methods for removing the Indians were foul, but whether this was admirable or reprehensible depended on your point of view. What shocked James was the general acceptance that he had some proof of the illegality of at least one of Andrew's treaties.

How can so many people know what is in a private correspondence? he thought angrily, and walked off into the night, to be alone.

It was Becky Perkins who saw him leave and pointed it out to Sally, who was puzzled. James had been in a remarkably good humor when they had danced together earlier, but Becky thought he had left angrily. When he didn't return after twenty minutes or so, Sally went looking for him.

She found him at Rachel's tomb. She hadn't really looked anywhere else. She guessed that something someone had said about Andrew had made him angry, and whenever he had been angry with Andrew in the past, it was to Rachel he had gone. It was a pretty night, a cloudless, star-spangled sky, and she could hear the revelers in the distance, but it was peaceful here in this quiet cemetery.

Sally didn't speak; she was sure James knew she was there. It was the first time she had seen the completed monument. It had a terrible finality to it, and for a moment she missed Rachel dreadfully.

"She chose this spot herself," James said after a while. "I think she knew she would not make old bones."

He was silent again. He looked at the stars, and then at his wife.

"How can he bear to be without her?" he said suddenly. "I could not live without you."

Sally moved to him and he put his arm around her. Just for

a moment, she felt a spark of anger with his procrastination, but it quickly passed, for his sensible caution in all things was one of the reasons why she loved him.

“You must finish it,” she said. “Whatever it is between you and Andrew, you must resolve it, once and for all. -It is Andrew, isn’t it?”

James nodded.

“Put an end to it, my dear,” she implored him. “For your own sake if not for mine.”

James looked at her, and knew he had not treated her fairly.

“I promise,” he said.

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The revels lasted until almost dawn, and some of the young bloods didn’t bother going home but bunked at the Hermitage, wherever they could find a bed. So there was a slightly faded air about the guests when they assembled at the Hermitage again the next day to witness the wedding; a little starch had gone from their clothes, and because of the success of the previous night, a little of the stiff formality from their behavior. No one took the wedding quite seriously, except perhaps the celebrants. For the whites it was only a couple of niggers jumping the broom, however well connected one of those niggers might be, and for most of the blacks, it was the only real party they had ever been invited to, no matter how restricted the celebration was.

They all assembled on the cleaned-up lawn and looked anxiously at the approaching rain clouds. Gracie, lovely in her white gown, was given away by Andrew junior, but Alfred, never nervous about anything, was in such a state of jitters he forgot her name in the ceremony and had to be prompted by Cap’n Jack. Everyone laughed, even the white minister conducting the service, and

only Jass puzzled for a moment as to why two soulless niggers would have a church wedding. At

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the end of the formal service, Cap'n Jack and Sarah brought the broom, and Alfred and Gracie jumped over it into the land of matrimony. Married at last, he kissed her, the crowd cheered, and the rain started.

"Into the bam, " Andrew junior yelled, and everyone made a dash for cover.

The huge barn had been made ready in case of this very eventuality, and everyone was in a jovial mood. The week had been a howling success, and on this, the last day of the festivities, they were all prepared to let their hair down, have a good party, and then go home. Nature had helped.

Even amid all this benevolent goodwill, the rules of race absolutely prevailed; they were as natural as breathing to all these people, white and black. Some pretension had been abandoned though. When old Mr.

Morissey's slave, pushing the Bath chair, tripped on his way to the bam, sending the old man sprawling into the mud, several young men, white and black, rushed out into the downpour to help, and together carried the complaining veteran into the bam.

When the band started to play the first tune, a lively reel, Alfred led Gracie into the center of the bam, and everyone oohed and aahed, as was proper, but no one was sure of the protocol, and it was the blacks who broke the impasse and followed the dancing couple's lead, never for one moment crossing the invisible line that had been drawn by some unseen white hand down the middle of the room.

"What the hell," cried Andrew junior. "Can't let the niggers have all the fun." He took Sarah's hand and they joined in the dance.

It was all reels and gavottes and polkas, and a furious determination to have a

good time. Jass was in the thick of it, and asked half a dozen young ladies to dance, and to his surprise, they all accepted. Lizzie, who was bored with her callow partners, became rather jealous, and eventually she did the unthinkable. During a small break in the music, she went to Jass, who was chatting happily with his most recent partner, and informed him that she had managed to squeeze him into her dance card.

The band struck up again, Jass grinned broadly, positively glowing with perspiration, Lizzie thought, and he grabbed Lizzie and whirled her onto the floor.

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“I didn’t say it was this dance,” Lizzie protested, but Jass only laughed.

“I don’t care,” he said, and suddenly Lizzie didn’t care, for his enthusiasm was infectious, and she danced as enthusiastically as he.

“My, but they make a handsome couple,” Becky Perkins said, watching from the sidelines with Sally and some other older women. The fellow hens clucked approvingly.

“Nonsense,” Sally snapped, “they’re both far too young.” She looked at Jass and Lizzie, dancing with teenage energy, and thought she had never seen her son so happy.

Easter was miserable. She’d spent most of the time hiding from Reuben, whose hands, she had discovered last night, were far too inquisitive. Every time she’d sneaked a look at the dance floor, she’d seen Jass with a different partner, and now he’d been with Lizzie three dances in a row. Jass was so clearly having a good time that Easter was now jealous not of Lizzie but of the good time. Something inside her snapped. She was young, here was a chance to enjoy herself, and even if Reuben did have wandering hands, they couldn’t wander too far or else she’d yell for her father. She knew he was looking for her, and moved to a position where he could find her.

to a position where he could find her.

“Bin looking for you everywhere,” he said.

Easter feigned indifference. “You ain’t the only nigger I dances with.”

He grinned happily. “You ain’t dancin’ now,” he said, and offered her his arm.

Easter was about to accept, but she heard the music and saw that the dance was one she didn’t know. She hadn’t had much teaching, a few lessons with Sassy and the occasional improvised hop in the slave quarters, and while she could manage simple jigs, this was a dance she hadn’t seen. It looked complicated: With lots of whooping and hollering, people would swirl about with one partner, and then at some signal Easter couldn’t pick up, would change to another partner and swirl about with them.

Reuben saw the tiny doubt in her eye, and correctly guessed the reason.

“It’s easy,” he assured her. “I c’n-teach you.”

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Easter, longing to dance, accepted his assurance. “I hopes yo’c’n teach yo’ hands to mind their manners, too,” she sniffed, and followed him to the floor.

He taught her quickly, or she learned fast, and oh, it was fun. The general mood infected her: This was the last day, tomorrow they’d be going back home to dull normality, and Easter was determined to make the most of these last few moments. She threw herself into the dance with an abandon that rivaled Jass’s energy, only partly in the hope that if he caught sight of her, he would see she didn’t need him to have a good time.

He did catch sight of her, and she him, and he waved happily, as if pleased to see her enjoying herself, and she waved back and swung toward her next partner, and into his arms, and into what seemed to be, for a few moments, the end of the world.

For she had crossed the invisible line. She stared at the incredulous white man in horror, and immediately all her training leaped to the fore.

“I so sorry, Massa,” she said, and tried to get away, but he would not let her go. It was Easter’s misfortune to have danced into the arms of Ralph Morissey, who had inherited all his father’s intolerance and prejudices.

“Does anybody own this nigra?” he roared, and the party came to a stop.

Perhaps they had all been expecting it to happen, the whites anyway, and some of the blacks, or even wanting it. They had all been flirting on the very edge of the line, taunting it, daring it; it had added spice to the day, and it was as if they needed a sharp reminder, before going home, of the natural order of their lives.

Easter sank to the floor, still held in Morissey’s grasp. The dancers stopped dancing. The band stopped playing. The room fell silent. A white man was asserting his dominance over a black, and there was nothing anyone in the bam could do. The only man who could help Easter was not there.

Cap’n Jack was in despair. His daughter was being humiliated there, and visions of Annie being torn away from the girl, screaming, to some unknown fate, flooded his mind. Shaking with shame and fury, he looked desperately for James

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and tried not to believe that he wasn’t there to save Easter, just as he had not been there to save Annie.

“I say, who owns this nigra?” Ralph Morissey called again.

It took Jass a moment to realize what was happening, and when he did, he looked around for his father. He could not see James, and then remembered him leaving some time before with Henry Clay, who had arrived in Nashville unexpectedly that morning.

He looked at his mother, and she was looking at him. She nodded her head very slightly, and Jass understood that it was all up to him. His stomach lurched, but he could not shirk his duty-to himself, his family, his tribe, or to Easter. He was, at this moment, her Massa.

He started walking toward Morissey. People moved aside to let him pass.

The silence was deafening. His own footsteps thundered in Jass's ears, and Easter's gentle weeping. He heard a voice mutter behind him, "Flog the bitch."

The walk lasted forever, but eventually he was there. He looked Morissey in the eye, and held out his hand to Easter.

"Come along, Easter," he said. "I'm sure you have work to do. "

She took his hand, and Morissey, honor satisfied, let go his grasp. The niggers knew who was in charge again.

The silence continued as Jass led Easter away, he didn't know where, anywhere, just to get her out of there. Now they walked through the black section of the room, and the slaves, eyes downcast, parted for them in embarrassed silence as surely as the triumphant whites had done. Easter kept her eyes to the floor, to hide her tears and her shame, and Jass stared straight ahead.

Cap'n Jack moved now. There was a small room attached to the barn, a shed or workplace, and he went to it and opened the door. Jass nodded to him gratefully, and took Easter inside.

Even after they had left the room, the silence continued, until Andrew junior broke it.

"What am I paying you for?" he called to the orchestra. "Play!" They began to play, sensibly, a slow waltz.

A few couples started to dance again, and gradually something of the old mood returned-to half of those present. The blacks had been put back in their place and did not immedi-

ately see the sense in provoking more of the white man's wrath. For the next three or four dances, it was a white man's party.

James was not in the bam because Henry Clay had come to talk to him. He had arrived at the Hermitage that morning from Ashland, his home in Kentucky, where he had been spending the summer. He had made his respects to Andrew junior, who was not thrilled to see him, and Sarah, who was enchanted by his easy elegance, and he had watched the wedding from the house. When the rain started, he sought out James, who was the reason for his visit. They had been given the use of Andrew's study, which amused them, for both knew it was Andrew they were going to discuss.

They circled the issue warily for a while, until James could not contain his curiosity.

"How are things in Washington?" he began.

"I've no idea," Henry laughed. "It's been a pleasant summer in Kentucky, away from it all. I do not relish going back."

He was lying, and they both knew it. The cut and thrust of politics was life and blood to Henry.

"And Andrew?" James asked, smiling in gentle provocation., "Military men should be employed by governments, not in charge of them,"

Henry laughed in response. "This second term is Andrew's last campaign, and he is determined to win the war. "

He took a pinch of snuff. His levity did not fool James. He knew Henry was vitally concerned about the welfare of the country.

"He rides roughshod over Congress, and has tom the Constitution to tatters. He claims a mandate from the people, but all they did was elect him to an office, not crown him king. He claims to be the champion of the states, but he gathers

ever more power into his own office. John—he was referring to John Quincy Adams, Andrew's predecessor- "never used the veto once. Andrew threatens it every day."

They were old enemies. Henry was particularly bitter about Andrew's veto of his bill to recharter the United States Bank. Andrew's bitter opposition to the central bank had led to its

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effective demise and to a rash of new state banks, operating under a patchwork quilt of legislation by the individual states.

"He won't be there much longer. Another eighteen months-" James said.

Henry laughed again. "Nothing will change. Van Buren will ride to the presidency on Andrew's coattails, and continue all his policies because he has none of his own."

"You could run against him," James suggested, but although Henry shook his head, his reply was enigmatic. "Perhaps," he said.

He took another pinch of snuff. "But Martin would be a formidable opponent, if only because he bathes in Andrew's aura," Henry continued. "We'll see."

There was a small silence. James waited and wondered and guessed. Henry came to the point.

"If you had information, written documents, that would help discredit Andrew, would you release them?"

James felt a deep and churning anger rise. How did everybody know?

"What documents?" he asked, evenly.

"Bribes paid to certain compliant Chickasaws in return for a treaty." Henry did not mince matters.

James shook his head. "I have no such evidence," he said. "No such proof."

"A very large amount of Chickasaw land was deeded to you by the federal government immediately after that treaty was signed," Henry said. "Long before the land was generally made available."

He stared at James, as if willing him to renounce the lie. But Henry was not Andrew, and his steady gaze only caused James's anger to erupt.

"It was collateral for a loan," he exploded. "I've lent him fortunes over the years, going all the way back to New Orleans, and never seen a penny in return. This time I wanted insurance."

Henry sighed, knowing he was wasting his time. He had not expected to succeed, but he would not have forgiven himself if he had not tried.

"Did you get your money back?" He smiled. There was no point in antagonizing James any further.

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"Yes," James said. -I got my money back."

Henry kept trying, but gently now, for he understood the truth. James did have proof of Andrew's culpability, but in releasing it he might destroy himself, and few men are willing to be their own executioners. Eventually they said their goodbyes, and Henry made to leave.

"All I did was lend him money," James said again, as Henry left the room.

In a small side room of the bam, Cap'n Jack and Angel were trying to comfort the wretched Easter.

"Hush, chile," Cap'n Jack said. "'Twere an accident. No one gwine blame

you.”

“They all did,” Easter cried. “‘Tweren’t my fault!”

Angel nodded because she saw the injustice of it. “I said no good would come of it, black folk mixin’ with white,” she said. “‘Tain’t fittin’.”

Easter stared at the party through the open door. What hurt her most was that Jass had not stayed with her. He had brought her here, said a few sensible things while she cried, and then left her. She could see him dancing with Lizzie, as if nothing much had happened.

Reuben came to the door. “Feelin’ better?” he asked, with genuine concern. Easter stared at him, and then at Jass dancing with Lizzie, and could not cope with any of it. She slammed the door in Reuben’s face, and fell into Cap’n Jack’s arms, weeping again.

If there had ever been a chance that Cap’n Jack would forget or abandon his vows of vengeance against James, it was gone now. Easter had been silly and forgetful, but no more than that, and surely did not deserve such a public humiliation. James was not directly responsible for what had happened, but he was a Massa of slaves, and that in itself was causing a blind fury in Cap’n Jack. Not even Jass’s triumphant behavior was of any solace to him.

But Jass had impressed many of the white women present, and especially Lizzie. The boy had looked like a man, had behaved like a man, striding across the silent dance floor to protect his property. Several female hearts had fluttered, and Jass was not

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short of dancing partners, but Lizzie deflected any rivals by refusing to let him out of her sight or her arms. At the same time, being sensible, she did not attempt to silence any of the flattering attention that was surrounding Jass.

Jass loved it. He had met his first challenge in the adult world, and had triumphed. Nor did he mind the fact that Lizzie was constantly beside him.

She was pretty, she was his own age, and she was flirting with him outrageously. Jass knew he would have sweet dreams that night.

He even felt some charity toward Easter. At first, when he realized the enormity of what she had done, his only thought was to thrash her hide, but now, hero of the moment, he decided that she'd been silly, she was only young, and he looked forward to smacking her cute little tail.

He wondered how much more he could achieve. The barn was hot, the evening cool. He suggested to Lizzie that they take a turn outside, and she had flutteringly agreed.

The rain had stopped, leaving behind the pretty smell of a damp garden.

They strolled together arm in arm for a while, and then Jass summoned up his courage.

"I wonder if— he began, "-when we get back to Alabama-I might call on you."

Lizzie, knowing the future that her parents at least were mapping out for them, feigned surprise.

"Whatever for?" she asked innocently.

The question confused Jass; the answer was obvious to him. "Well, you know, so we can-get to know each other better."

Lizzie waved her fan rapidly, as if she were having hot flushes.

"Why, Mr. Jackson," she drawled. "I do believe you're courting me."

Jass, to his surprise, didn't blush. "I guess I am," he laughed.

"My," Lizzie said. "I don't believe I'm quite ready for that." She saw the disappointment on his face, and added her intended rider. "But I don't suppose there'd be any harm if you came to see me once in a while—"

Jass laughed again, feeling wonderful. Having got this far, he decided to push his luck.

“Oh, Lizzie,” he said and hoped it conveyed some passion.

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He leaned close to her and kissed her on the lips, his as firmly closed as hers.

Lizzie allowed it to happen, and then broke away in apparent outrage.

“Sir!” she cried. “Just because I squeezed you into my dance card does not give you the right to violate my person! Don’t you ever kiss me again!”

For a moment, Jass was confused, and believed that she meant it.

“Not until you have learned to do it properly,” Lizzie laughed, and ran back to the barn.

Jass laughed too, but didn’t follow her. He had accomplished enough for one night, and knew there was no more to be had. He had stared at the stars, and found it hard to believe that life, with its many daunting confusions, could offer such enormous rewards.

Only one tiny problem clouded his flawless horizon. He had kissed Lizzie chastely, lips closed, as he kissed all women his mother, his aunts, his sisters and his cousins-but she had suggested it was not enough.

Obviously, there, was more to kissing than Jass had understood.

He wondered whom he could ask about it, and dismissed any of the older men he knew, because perhaps it was something he should already know.

Wesley, he decided. On his return to Florence, he would seek the advice of his old nemesis, Wesley, because now they had something in common.

He didn’t want to go back to the party, which was in its closing stages

anyway. He wanted this night to last forever.

Jass sat on a log and savored the night and took joy in the company of his newfound friend, Jass.

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Jass kept his promise to himself, but James broke his word to Sally. He wrote to Andrew soon after their return to Florence, but it was because they heard of a chimney fire that had destroyed the Hermitage. There had been no loss of life, but the letter was full of sympathy, for James knew how much the mansion he had so lovingly built meant to his old friend. He did not mention the removal, or the contentious letters, telling himself that this was not the time, that he wanted to restore a working relationship with Andrew again before raising such difficult matters.

Andrew replied a few weeks later, and was courteous and wrote of his determination to rebuild the Hermitage exactly as it had been. It pleased James to have such a warm response and he was becoming less concerned about the removal. The Chickasaw were going west, and while he heard many stories about their privations along the way, James decided that Sara was right. It wasn't the same as the British in Ireland: The Indians were being given good land, to live in peace and prosperity in their tribal manner. It was young Doublehead who helped bring James to this conclusion, although he was hardly young anymore.

It was a cold November afternoon. James was alone in the house, but for several slaves. Sally and Sassy were staying with Mary, who was in confinement again, and Jass was spending the weekend with his new friend Wesley. The Trio were with Sally and Sassy.

The winter sun was low and without warmth. The dogs had been uneasy since midday, restless and whining. Several times, James had looked out the window and thought he saw people moving among the distant trees, but assumed it to be the normal business of the plantation. Toward sundown, the dogs started barking in earnest, incessantly, excitedly, as at prowling-291

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ers, and James went outside to investigate, hoping a slave had not been foolish enough to run away.

Mitchell and Noah, a slave guard, were on the front lawn, both with dogs straining at their leashes, desperate to get to some quarry. Other slaves had gathered near the house, silently, curiously, looking to the horizon.

Standing among the distant trees, in small groups of two and three, family groups, were some Indians, Cherokee or Chickasaw, James guessed, tribally dressed for winter. They had luggage with them, bundles and packs, as if they were going on a journey.

They did nothing but stare at the mansion, or the hill on which it stood.

They seemed to have no purpose or intention, and their stillness maddened the dogs more than any movement.

James became aware of Cap'n Jack standing beside him.

"It's Doublehead," Cap'n Jack said.

Young Chief Jimmy Doublehead, now a man of forty, was standing at the gate, a woman beside him carrying a child, and a couple of elders. Like the others, they did nothing but stare at the house.

"Kennel the dogs," James said.

Mitchell was reluctant. You never knew, with Indians.

: "Sir, them's Injuns-" he began, but James cut him short.

"Kennel the dogs!" he commanded.

Mitchell glanced at Noah, and at the Chickasaw, and having no choice, obeyed the order, pulling the dogs away, behind the house.

Once the dogs were gone, Doublehead and the elders began walking to the house. It was a cold evening. James shivered a little, and went back inside.

Shortly afterward, there was a tap on the door of his study, and Parson Dick came in, followed by Doublehead, his squaw, and the elders. James rose from his desk to greet his old friend.

11 Jimmy, how good to see you,” he said warmly, holding out his hand. But Doublehead did not accept the greeting, and spoke in Cherokee.

“You know I can’t speak your language,” James said, and laughed. “I know I should, the years I’ve lived here, but let’s speak in English.”

But Doublehead spoke again in his language. There was a

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small silence, and James was embarrassed. The gravity of the Cherokee’s demeanor disturbed him.

“He says he will not speak the white man’s tongue,” a quiet voice said, and James realized that it was Parson Dick.

“Since he is forbidden by white man’s law to live among you, he sees no need for your language,” Parson Dick continued.

James was astonished that Parson Dick had any knowledge of Cherokee, but was more concerned at establishing some communication with Jimmy.

“What does he want?” James asked.

Parson Dick spoke in Cherokee, and Doublehead replied.

“You told us we could live amongst you as equals, but that is denied to us,” Parson Dick said. “Now you tell us that we cannot even live amongst you.”

He listened again.

“What will you tell us next? That we cannot live?-

James had no reply. He was excluded from Doublehead's world now, just as Doublehead was being excluded from his.

"They are going on a long journey, to new land in the West, away from the power of the white man, and they are very pleased."

Although a Cherokee, Jimmy had been living on the Chickasaw land since his father's death, had married a Chickasaw woman, and was now going west with these people, but James was surprised. He had not thought that the enforced removal would be a source of comfort to any Indian.

"I wish them well," James said. "it will be a difficult journey. "

Parson Dick translated and listened to the reply.

"Many have gone before and have not survived," he told James. "But they have no choice, for if they stay here they will surely perish."

He listened to Doublehead. James looked at the squaw. Cradling the child in her arms, she stared ahead, not seeing him, not seeing anything. She seemed to James to have no sense Of future, no sense of hope.

"The chief wishes to thank you for the many kindnesses you have shown to him and to his father, and he asks that you grant one more."

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Anything, James thought, I would give anything to be free of this guilt.

"Anything," he said.

Doublehead spoke, and Parson Dick translated.

"This land is sacred to the tribe, the spirits of their ancestors live here. The child, the chief's new son, has not heard their voices, and they wish to take the spirits with them, to the new land, in the West."

They were in territory that James did not understand. He looked to Parson Dick for help.

“It will be a short ceremony,” he said, “and they will be gone by dawn.”

“Of course,” said James, surprised that it was so easy, and wishing they were gone now.

Parson Dick told Jimmy and the Chickasaw of the assent, and they moved to go.

“Tell him-” He stopped, not knowing what he wanted to say. “Tell him-that as long as I and my family own this land, they will always be welcome here.”

Doublehead turned to James in amazement, and saw an unbridgeable gulf between his people and the white men who pretended to be their brothers.

He spoke, for the first time, in English. The point he wanted to make was so basic to his thinking that he did not trust any translation.

“You do not own this land,” he said. “You may have the use of it while you live, but you cannot own it.”

He knew James didn’t understand, but he had to try to make someone comprehend. He had so little time.

“You use the land while you live, a few short years, and pass it to your sons. But if they are killed in battle, or if they have no sons, who does the land belong to then?”

James could stand it no longer. “It is my land, forever!” he cried out.

Doublehead knew he had touched a deep chord in James, but suddenly felt inadequate to express the depth of his feelings.

“The land is eternal, and we are mortal,” he said. “You cannot own land.”

He saw, with astonishing clarity, that James was scared, and understood that he was scared of death, that the white men

were seared of dying. Their afterlife, their spirit world, was in some other, unknown country, and they were afraid to go there. Suddenly, all the wars and the treaties and the bargains and the promises seemed a useless waste of time, because the Indians had never understood the basic fear that possessed the white men. Doublehead knew that he would never see the new land in the West because he had no heart for it. He knew that he would die on the journey, and his spirit would roam forever, free, in this country of his ancestors. All he cared about now was his son, whose life was not yet chanted. He couldn't bear to look at James anymore, and left the room. The squaw, who had never looked at James, followed, with the elders.

Parson Dick did not leave. James had slumped into his chair, and Parson Dick waited for some response or order that he was sure would come.

He coughed gently, and James looked at him, as if surprised he was still there.

"Yes, a brandy," James said, and was silent while Parson Dick poured the drink. Doublehead was wrong. James did understand.

"How do you know the language?" he asked eventually.

"My Massa before you was a Cherokee chief," Parson Dick replied.

He left the room. James's mind swirled with contradictory thoughts, his heart with conflicting emotions. He had seen, with a clarity that rivaled Doublehead's, the great chasm between the white world and that of the native peoples. For one small, glorious moment, he envied them. The idea that his spirit might dwell for all eternity on this land that he loved was precious to him, but he did not believe in such spirit life, and for one small, terrible moment he felt a visceral fear of the God of wrath and judgment.

He took a sip of brandy, and relaxed. It was easy now. Since the two peoples would never understand each other, it was better that the Indians go. Andrew had won, Andrew had been right all the time. Since they could not co-exist, they should not even try.

James felt better than he had done in weeks.

James felt better than he had done in years.

The ceremony was short and very simple, and James was charmed by it. The Chickasaw built a fire on the lawn, and

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sat around it, chanting, a few men beating small drums, Two elders danced around the fire, summoning the ancestors, James knew.

Slaves had gathered to watch. The drumming and chanting seemed to evoke some primal, distant memories in them, of other times and other countries that most of them had no remembrance of, and they began swaying to the rhythm.

Doublehead, his son cradled in his arms, walked to the center of the circle of people, and as the beat quickened, he raised his son to the stars, to hear the voices of the old ones. Again, it struck that distant echo of memory in the slaves, and they sighed, or it might have been the gentle wind in the leafless trees, but for a moment James thought he heard the old ones answer.

A shiver ran down his spine. This simple ceremony had touched some mystic, primal chord in James, in a way that no Christian idea ever had, and it frightened him. If these people were truly in touch with the spirit world, if they could so easily evoke forces, passions, instincts that were inaccessible to whites, or at least discounted by them, then perhaps the wrong being done to them was greater than James had ever allowed himself to imagine. He looked at his slaves, who so obviously had some visceral understanding of the rituals being enacted; perhaps they too understood things that were alien to James. And if it was wrong to disinherit the Indians, was it as great a wrong to disinherit the blacks?

Already James knew the answer, but to proceed along that path was even more destructive to the world he had created than any of the previous terrors he had felt. He turned his head away to break the spell being woven on him, and tried to dismiss what he was hearing, what he was seeing, and what he was thinking, because he wanted to, as simple superstition. These are primitive peoples, he told himself, the red and the black, and it is incumbent on us to

defend them and protect them. But without us they are nothing. Without us, the land is nothing. Without us, the world returns to pagan savagery, and has no meaning.

He went back into the house and poured himself another brandy. Tomorrow, the Indians would be gone, and there would be no further questions about their land and how it was appropriated.

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The Chickasaw were as good as their word, and were gone by dawn, on their long journey west, to Texas. Apart from the ashes of a fire, there was no evidence that they had ever been there.

And it is proper that they go, James thought. We have done our best for them. It is the duty of the strong to look after the weak.

Jass was not weak, but he enjoyed the protective arm of Wesley around him.

To his surprise, it had been easy to embellish their small acquaintance, and it had flowered into a curious friendship. The unlikely foundation to it was the cause of their previous quarrels. Jass was interested in black people in a general sense, but Wesley was developing a passion for black women.

“Oh, I love them, man,” he said almost every day. “Especially in a proper bed, that black skin on a white sheet.”

Jass blushed the first time Wesley said this, because he could imagine it only too well. He tried to think of Lizzie on crisp linen sheets, and while it was exciting, it didn't arouse him nearly as much as an image of Easter in the same situation. Wesley, sensing the weakness, played on it, giving laughing, voluptuous descriptions of his encounters with slave women, which aroused fierce urges in Jass. Then he would tease Jass about his sensitivity on the subject

of slavery, and Jass, still basking in the warm memory of white female congratulation in Nashville, began to think that perhaps slavery was the best solution for the blacks.

It surprised Jass too that Wesley, school champion, constantly surrounded by admiring cohorts, had very few close friends. He was welcomed and immediately liked wherever he went, perceived at first, Jass could tell, as the quintessential young Southern man. Wesley reveled in the adulation, but delighted in shocking people because he knew he would be forgiven much. Emboldened by this very charity, Wesley's challenges to revered institutions were becoming sharper and more caustic, and attitudes to him were changing. He would skate, wildly, dangerously across the thinnest ice of decency in conversation, especially with young ladies, and initially this sauciness had provoked a few raised eyebrows and the com-

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ment from older men that he was a young ram. Often now, however, he would go too far, the ice would crack beneath him, and the words "Young scoundrel" were frequently whispered, not always behind his back.

Like Jass, Wesley was a second son, bom to money, but his older brother was healthy and not adventurous, and so, barring accidents, it was unlikely that Wesley would ever inherit the family name or position, and he felt no sense of impending responsibility. "Life is for living," he would tell Jass, and was directing all his burning, golden energy to that end. His attitude to slavery was simple: It always had been and always would be, it was essential to their survival, and it was right, and if the Feds ever tried to abolish it there'd be a war. Wesley loved the South and all it stood for, believed it was one of the greatest civilizations the world had ever known, and longed for a chance to thrash the Yankees in battle.

Or to thrash anybody, because it wasn't the cause, Jass learned, it was the fight. It was the danger. It was the adventure. Wesley was bored. Reckless with a young man's energy, Wesley hated school, hated the idea of college, and hated

even more the idea of a life as indolent second son, indulged and pampered, waiting in the wings for a role that, once his older brother had sons, would never be his.

“And then what do I do?” he despaired.

“Get lost in New Orleans, I imagine,” Jass had laughingly responded, for everyone knew of that city’s free and easy reputation.

Wesley shook his head. “No, whores are fine, but why pay for something when you can get it free?” The most compelling argument for slavery in Wesley’s mind was that it provided him with an endless supply of women who could not say no to him.

“And anyway, that’s for after the battle,” he continued. “It’s the fight that gets your blood up.”

Jass was staying with him for the weekend, and they were in his room, in separate beds to sleep. Suddenly Wesley jumped up, and began shadowboxing with the wall.

“It’s all this bloody civilization,” he said. “Everything’s so neat and ordered now. There aren’t any good battles left.”

“Texas,” Jass said, smiling because he knew the effect the

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word would have, and because Wesley looked funny, feinting at the wall in his nightshirt.

“Yes, Texas,” Wesley almost groaned. “That’s where I should be.”

Texas was his dream. Texas was the new frontier. There was going to be a war in Texas, no doubt about it, for the white settlers there were chafing under Mexican rule, and the Mexican general, Santa Ana, was determined to bring them to colonial heel. Scores of young men were heading for Texas.

“That’s the place for me,” said Wesley, his eyes bright with longing.

“Kick the Dons’ cods in daytime, and javer their women at night.”

He fell back on the bed, and grinned at Jass. “There’s this little mulatta down in the slave quarters,” he teased. “Hotter than the sun in August. Shall you go down there with me?”

Jass laughed, and shook his head. It happened all the time. Wesley was determined that Jass should lose his virginity in his presence, but delighted in Jass’s persistent refusal.

“I know, saving it for someone special,” he mimicked Jass’s response. He punched his pillow, and was silent for a moment. Then he took a little bottle from a drawer in the table beside his bed. He held it out to Jass.

Jass was inclined to shake his head again. He’d had laudanum a few times when he was sick, and once, recently, with Wesley, who stole it occasionally from his mother’s medicine chest. Jass had loved it, loved the sensation of floating on a fluffy pink cloud, all time and care and guilt removed. It was so wonderful, it frightened him too, and he worried that Wesley was falling prey to its powerful addiction. He didn’t want to offend his friend, nor appear childish, so he took the bottle, put it to his lips and, pretended to swallow. Wesley laughed, took the bottle back and swigged the drug.

“Better than being bored to death,” he said, and lay back on his pillow, to prepare for the dreams.

Jass relaxed too. He’d taken only a tiny drop of the opiate, but it was enough. He began to feel warm and slow, and his heart swelled with affection for his restless friend. He laughed at the very idea that he could call Wesley his friend, but was thrilled with it, for he often felt that Wesley was taking him to places he would never have gone by himself, if only in his mind. Like riding an eagle, he thought.

He chuckled again at the things they had done together. Now when he puffed on his corn cob pipe, there was tobacco in it, because Wesley had taught him to smoke. Once they had tried hemp, and Jass had loved that at first, but fought against it, and had become ill. And once he had gone with Wesley to that mulatta in the slave quarters. He'd stayed outside, but had listened in excitement and embarrassment while Wesley took her.

He wondered why he was so reluctant to do it himself. There were endless opportunities in Wesley's company, and part of him wanted to take that step, to cross that threshold of experience, but a greater part of him said not yet. And try as he might, he couldn't keep his mind off Easter.

He chuckled once more at an image of Wesley as Emperor of Texas, surrounded by a harem of Indian and black women who were dressing him for battle, and then the image changed and altered, and Wesley was on his horse now, galloping off to battle some thousands of the enemy, and single-handedly gaining bloody victory over them all.

He chuckled again, out of sheer, disbelieving astonishment when, the following August, Wesley came to him and said goodbye.

He was not going to New Jersey, to the College at Princeton Village, as his family and friends believed.

"It's not for me, old man," he said. "Too bloody boring. Will you tell my family in a couple of weeks, when I'm safely away?"

He had money in his pocket, given him by his father, and a gun, and he rode a fine horse,

He was going west, to Texas.

That summer was bitter-sweet for James. The departure to the west of Doublehead and the Chickasaw had closed a large and unpleasant chapter in the book of his life, and he found himself less and less interested in the affairs of his state and his nation, more and more devoted to his personal affairs and his family. Sassy's marriage to her beau, Bob Andrews, gave him joy, but then his darling daughter Jane had died of diphtheria, and Mary's newborn child had not survived birth. Mary herself never recovered from the ordeal and the loss, and passed away in March. It had hit James hard-he loved his firstborn daughter-but it was not the acid grief he had felt for the loss of his firstborn son. He found comfort in the living, and took particular pleasure in Sam Kirkman, Elizabeth and Tom's grave and serious son, who, at five, was discovering the joy of a doting grandfather.

Spring eased his sense of loss with its promise of the renewal of life, and summer, with its abundant stream of visiting friends and relations, healed his pain and gave him a new purpose and vigor. He was alive and master of a fine estate, and that was what mattered most to him.

And then there was Jass. James thoroughly approved of his son's friendship with Wesley, who seemed to have kindled bright new flames of confidence in Jass, if not adventure. Perhaps they were always there, James thought, and it was I who wanted too bright a fire too soon. He encouraged the friendship, for he saw in the increasingly wayward Wesley something of the larrikin he missed in his son, and through that friendship he saw his son becoming more like the boisterous Wesley.

He was not prepared for the news Jass gave him on a hot day in August.

He had not seen Wesley at the house for a few 301

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days, nor had Jass gone to visit him. One night after dinner, when Sally had withdrawn to leave them to talk, James asked if they had quarreled.

Jass was silent for a moment, and it was clear some serious problem was vexing him.

“Wesley’s gone to Texas,” he said.

James was surprised, but no more than that, for the moment. “I thought he was going to Princeton.”

Jass shook his head. “He’s taken the money his father gave him for college and he’s gone to Texas. He’s sure there’s going to be a war with the Mexicans, and he wants to be part of it. “

James laughed lightly, but it was double-edged. For just a moment, he dreamed that Jass might have gone off on such an adventure, but as immediately dismissed the thought. Jass’s proper place was here, and his son had behaved properly. But, oh-

, , Well, he’s right. There will be a war.” James wasn’t quite sure what to say. Some battle for the future status of Texas seemed inevitable. Men from all over the country were headed there, to resist the colonial bondage of Mexico. But Wesley seemed very young.

“He’s very young,” James said.

Jass was more concerned with something else.

“The thing is—he blurted it out-“I am to tell his father.

James laughed again. He began to see the problem.

“And he’ll know I’ve known for two weeks, and he’ll be furious I haven’t told him before, and there’ll be the dickens of a row.”

James was amused, but adopted a serious manner, knowing that was what Jass wanted. “I assume you gave your word to Wesley?”

Jass nodded, but it was no great comfort.

“Then you must keep your word. We all have to face rows at some time in our lives,” he said. “And I’ll go with you.”

He went with Jass, as moral support, but let Jass do all the talking.

James saw it as a small rite of passage for his son, for Wesley's father, he knew, was a stem old martinet, who

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would not be pleased by his son's disobedience.

To the surprise of both of them, Wesley's father took the news well.

"The boy's a troublemaker, destined for a scoundrel, I fear," he said calmly. "If he wants to go and kill a few Indians, sow his oats, get it out of his system, it could be the making of him."

Jass was surprised. "I think it's Mexicans he's planning to kill, sir,"

he said.

Wesley's father looked at him as if he were a fool. "Mexicans? They are not our enemy in Texas."

"But, sir, it is a Mexican colony," Jass insisted.

"And we will take it from them," Wesley's father said. "We will take it or buy it or annex it, depending on the whim of the president. It will be a slave state, as it is now and properly should be, and help diminish the undue influence of those wretched New Englanders."

It made sense, except for one thing. The thesis had to be completed: "But then what will we do with all those Indians?"

James stared at the man, hating him, hating his clarity of vision, for as soon as it was said, James saw an awful result.

"What will the native Comanche and Apache feel about all those Creek and Choctaw and Chickasaw that we have sent there?" Wesley's father chuckled.

“There will be bloody war, and we will have to sort it out, and the Indian problem will be resolved in this land finally, and for all time.”

James could not bear to believe it, and knew it was true. He had known it all along, and had denied it to himself for so long. The Indian question was not resolved by the removal. We would take Texas, and then California, and the wars against the Indians would go on, until the remaining few would stand with their backs to the great ocean, and then where would they go? It was an old nightmare for James.

Wesley’s father chuckled again. “Even those damned Cherokee, for they will go west and will meet their destruction.”

The Cherokee in Georgia were resisting every considerable effort to persuade them to go west. But they would go, James knew, if not by treaty, then by force. Andrew would make them go. Apart from the Cherokee, only some Seminole in

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Florida were violently resisting removal, under their chief, Osceola.

Some new thought had disturbed Wesley’s father, but it had nothing to do with white dominion. “Whatever shall I tell his mother?” he wondered aloud.

“She dotes on him so.”

Jass was volubly relieved that the interview had gone so well, but James was silent as they rode home, possessed by dark foreboding. Why did the Indians haunt him so? Would this nightmare never end?

It got worse in October when James received an unwelcome visitor. Dr. David Evans was a missionary to the Indians who had traveled west with some of the Creek and was now returning to Georgia to plead for an end to the removal.

He was trying to enlist whatever political support he could find, and had letters

of introduction to James from Henry Clay.

“You are an old friend of the president, I believe.” The minister wasted no time. “I beg you, sir, to do everything in your power to persuade him to end this merciless extinction of a people.”

He knows about the letters, James thought immediately. “Andrew will not be president for much longer.”

“He is president now.” Dr. Evans was relentless. “And architect of this most foul thing.”

James wanted to scream at him to go away, but he listened politely. The good minister’s description of the journey west was horrifying.

“They have no real understanding of what is happening to them, and no will to make it succeed. They are uprooted from their natural home, and are on a journey that has no point or meaning to them, for where they arrive will mean nothing to them. Since they are not afraid of death, and because they see no real point in living, they die. There is not sufficient food to nourish them, or blankets to keep them warm. What food is provided is usually rotten, and their hunting grounds are lost to them. And so they die. There is cholera amongst them, and because they do not have hope, they have no will to fight it, and so they die.”

He told his tale just as it was, without elaboration, and the factual simplicity of it made it more shocking to James.

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If it is summer they perish from heat; if it is winter they die from cold. Of the four hundred that I journeyed with, one hundred and twenty reached the great river.

“Only pitiful provision has been made for them, and so they spend the money they were given for their comfort on arrival to survive the journey there. Some of their Army escort rob them. Many merchants along the way deceive them. All

of us destroy them.

“A few federal officers who travel with them are often so distressed by what they see that they dig deep into their own pockets to try to buy some few creature comforts, but it is a task that would defeat Hercules.

“And when they reach the so-called promised land, what is there for them there? They stand like Ruth on alien soil and know not which way to turn.

They cannot hunt, for they do not know what to hunt. Or where. They cannot read this land for they have no voices of the old ones to guide them. The whites who are there do not want them. The Mexicans do not want them. The Indians who are there do not want them. And so they are destroyed in this New Jerusalem.”

“Not all of them, surely,” James said.

“Not all of them, no,” the minister replied. “But too many of them. And after the coming war with Mexico—for there will be a war—what will happen to them then? Will the so-called Republic of Texas tolerate these savages?

I think not. They can hardly tolerate the Indians already there.”

“It is over. There is nothing I can do,” James said. “Nothing we can do.”

“No, for them it is over,” the minister agreed. “But I am come to save those who have not gone. The Cherokee, in Georgia.

He understood that it was probably a waste of time to try to persuade the government of Georgia to alter its policy toward the Cherokee, but did not understand it was a waste of time to try to persuade the federal government—Andrew—to change its mind. He begged for James’s assistance.

“There is a story told,” he said, “of rose trees that the first Indians planted along the way to guide those who came after them. And as more came, they took cuttings from those bushes and planted them farther along, until the way from here to Texas was a path of roses.”

He stopped for a moment, for his emotions were getting the better of him.

“It is only a story, a sweet, romantic one, told to ease our guilt. There is no path of roses. Only a trail of heartrending tears. “

Alone at night, James wept. He knew that young Doublehead was dead, for he had seen that lack of hope in the chief’s eyes that evening in his study, and without hope, what point was there in life? He prayed, fervently, that Doublehead’s son was alive, but then wondered why? If his future was death, what point was there in life?

“I will do what I can,” he had told the minister. “But it is not much. “

It could not be much, he knew. Even if he published the letters, they would make almost no difference to the plight of the Indians; the removal would continue, the destruction of them would go on. Only one person could ease the pain.

Colonel Elliot was in Lexington making arrangements with Tom Flintoff to travel to England and finalize the purchase of the stallion Glencoe. There was no real need for James to go to Kentucky, but he wanted to be part of the excitement. It also put him closer to Washington.

He didn’t tell anyone, even Sally, of his intention; he was not even sure what he intended. He spent several pleasant days discussing horses in Kentucky, and was guest of honor at several parties given by horseracing men, for James was one of their most prominent number. Cap’n Jack attended him, and Ephraim had driven them there in a gig, since Sally was worried he might catch a chill if he rode horseback. When the day of departure came, Ephraim naturally headed for the Knoxville road.

“No,” said James. “We are going to Washington.”

Cap’n Jack looked at him in surprise, but James would not explain. He had written a letter to Sally the previous night, telling of his plan to resolve, finally,

his differences with Andrew. He wondered why he hadn't told her before, because when he left The Forks he had taken the correspondence with Andrew from its safe place and put the letters in his pocket.

They journeyed in silence. James did not know what he was

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going to do. He knew he was going to do something.

Cap'n Jack asked no questions. The Massa's business was the Massa's business, and he guessed, correctly, that James wanted to see Andrew. For himself, he was delighted that he might have the opportunity to see Alfred again.

At dinners in the hostelrys where they spent the nights, the talk of Andrew's achievements as president diminished as they got closer to Washington. Ordinary folk, the working people, revered him, but the Virginians of James's class disparaged the hick frontiersman and his arrogant ways. James put it down to simple jealousy. Virginians were used to being part of the ruling elite, and were Andrew's avowed enemies.

Still, it lightened his heart. Andrew became less and less of a legend, more and more of a man, and it was the man James had to persuade, not the giant.

He checked into a hotel in Alexandria, having been warned that accommodation in the village that was the capital was almost impossible to obtain, and sent a note to Andrew asking to be received. The reply was immediate and a generous affirmative.

They traveled by ferry across the river, hired horses on the other side, and rode through the farmland to the White House. James was fascinated by the few extravagant buildings that stood among cow paddocks, beacons to a great future amid a sea of mud.

The president's mansion was impressive enough from the outside, though smaller than James or Cap'n Jack had imagined, and looked a bit silly stuck here in this swampy wilderness. The inside was also shabbier than they had expected, dusty, giving a feeling of not being finished and lacking any sense of home,

although Andrew had lived here for seven years. Rachel would have made the difference, James knew.

Cap'n Jack was disappointed. There was no sign of Alfred. He guessed, again correctly, that Alfred would be with his Massa, and was again disappointed when James, on being ushered upstairs, told him to wait.

Cap'n lack settled on a broken chair that had been badly repaired, and waited.

Andrew had been ill, and was sitting at a desk in his bedroom, Alfred never far from his side. There was a small bowl of food

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on the desk, mashed potato and milk, and some rice.

He looked so old, gaunt, and wasted, James thought, but of course he was old, twenty years James's senior. He seemed to be sleeping, and a tiny dribble of spittle was running down his chin. The unruly hair was thin and white now, where once it had been a golden mane. James looked at Alfred, who shook his Massa lightly, and Andrew woke.

The limpid blue eyes looked around, searching for a target, and settled on James.

This is it, James thought, the end of everything between us.

This is it, Andrew thought, the end of a small, irrelevant business that should have been finished years ago.

He greeted James warmly, and they mutually inquired after family, and then there was silence, and Andrew seemed to drift away somewhere-to a tomb in Nashville, James suspected.

Then Andrew rallied. "Well?"

James put his case, and Andrew listened politely, attentively.

Occasionally. Alfred came to him and with a handkerchief wiped the dribble from his Massa's chin.

When James had finished, Andrew was silent again and stared at the papers on his desk. When he spoke, he looked helpless.

"What would you have me do?" he said. "The Cherokee are under Georgia law.

I cannot interfere with the workings of a sovereign state."

You are the president, James wanted to shout at him. You have done so much, you can do anything. They call you king!

"You have in Florida," James insisted.

"That is different. Osceola declared war on us. I had no choice but to act."

James knew logic would have no effect. "Do not make them go," he said softly. "Do not send them to their deaths."

I I I cannot make them go or stay, " Andrew said. " It is not for me to choose. They have elected to stay, and therefore they must abide by Georgia law. All I can do is offer them a possible alternative."

" It is an alternative that will lead to their destruction!" James tried hard, tried his best."

" It is the only hope they have." Andrew hardly appeared to have heard him.

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"It is in your power to ensure that the treaties are enforced," James insisted.
Andrew smiled.

“In the West, on federal land, I can protect them. In Georgia, I cannot.

We are not at war with Georgia. I cannot send in the army,” he said. “I cannot protect them from what they have chosen to be.”

“I beg you to end this thing,” James said. “You know what must happen to them if they stay, and what will happen to them if they go. “

Andrew nodded gently, and James thought he saw a tear in the old man’s eye. It is just age, he thought, like the spittle on his chin.

“I do what I can to save them,” Andrew said. “And will always do what I can to protect them, but only what I can, under the law.”

James knew he was wasting his time, had always known he would be, but wanted it over.

“I could publish the letters,” he said.

Andrew nodded again.

“Yes, you could. But I don’t see the point of it. An old correspondence about an issue that died long ago, It will change nothing, except to cast a small slur on my character-”

He laughed and coughed at the same time.

“Which character is already so vilely slandered, in so many ways, by things so much more vile.”

He looked at James, and didn’t appear to be so old.

“And cast a very large slur on your character, which is not used to infamy.”

He was changing, before James’s eyes. He wasn’t slouching anymore, and the eyes were no longer soft, like the sea, but bright and hard, like sapphires.

“In a year I will be gone from here, and soon forgotten,” he said. “I am already much too old. But you are still a young man. Why needlessly besmirch what you have so valiantly achieved?”

A palpable energy began to fill the room.

“Do you have them with you?” Andrew asked.

James nodded. They were in his pocket. He wondered why.

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Why did I bring them with me? Why didn’t I leave them at the hotel, or locked in the box at home?

“Give them to me” was all Andrew said.

James took the letters from his pocket and handed them over without demur.

Perhaps this is what I have wanted all along, he thought. The burden of responsibility is not mine anymore. I am free, at last, of this terrible guilt.

And all Andrew had to do was ask. All he had ever had to do was ask.

Andrew didn’t even look at the letters, knowing they would all be there. He put them in a drawer and locked it.

Neither of them spoke for a while, and when Andrew did, it was softly, sadly, with no trace of anger but an aching sense of loss.

“Have you so misunderstood me all these years?” he said, and James knew it was not a question.

“Do you think it nourishes me to see my children so piteously downcast? Do you think I do not weep for them? Do you think I have not fallen on my knees and begged almighty God to take this burden from me?”

He fell silent. He turned away from James, and when he spoke again, he seemed to be struggling to control his feelings.

“The earth was not made for savage beasts to roam upon at will.” His voice

trembled with emotion. “Those who stand in the way of honest industry must be swept aside. It is the order of Divine Providence, and I accept it with humility.”

Perhaps he was crying. He put one hand to his eyes as if to shield his grief from sight and waved the other at the man who had once been his friend, dismissing him. James looked at Alfred, who was still attending his Massa, and left the room.

As they walked away from the White House, Cap’n Jack glanced back and thought he saw Alfred at an upstairs window, but it was only a shadow of approaching night.

James hardly spoke for several days, but the farther they traveled from Washington and the closer they got to home, his spirits obviously lightened. Cap’n Jack thought he had cast aside some terrible burden. As they drove into Florence, on a crisp bright winter day, James looked out of the window at the bustling town, and chuckled.

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“Massa?” was all Cap’n Jack said, leaving open the possibility of response.

“I think we will bring Glencoe here,” James said, eyes bright with some new purpose. “I think we will bring all the horses here and make The Forks of Cypress the finest stable in America.”

There was one thing left to do, one small piece of unfinished business to attend to before the new life could begin.

On Christmas Day, James summoned Cap'n Jack to his study.

James was at his desk, filling out a paper. He continued to write while Cap'n Jack waited, and then looked at his slave.

"I thank you for your many years of loyalty," he said. "No one could have served me better."

A curious anticipation tingled in Cap'n Jack. "Thank you, Massa," he said calmly.

James had a little speech prepared. "When you first came to me, I did not hold with slavery, but it was the custom of the land. I promised you then that if you worked for me, willingly and well, I would give you your freedom one day."

Anticipation gave way to excitement. Cap'n Jack knew his hand was shaking, his stomach churning.

James held out the paper.

"Here is that freedom now," he said. "A little later than it should have been, but not too late, I trust."

Desperate emotions punched at Cap'n Jack's heart. Here it was at last, the dearest gift anyone could give him, the thing he had longed for all of his days, the thing any slave might easily have sold his soul for.

"No, thank you, Massa," he said.

James closed his eyes. Not this, he pleaded, not now, the sin is too old, it has been atoned for a million times.

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"Don't do this to me," he said.

Cap'n Jack could not do anything else. The vengeance he had nurtured for so

long had become part of him, like the blood in his veins. He could hear Annie's screams in his ears as she was being dragged away that day.

He could feel the uncontrollable anger, the inconsolable grief, the terrible fury he had known that day. He wanted to hurt the man he held responsible, and knew that he could. He was not his own man now. The demon had him.

"You broke your promise. You let Annie be sold away," he said.

"I wasn't here, it wasn't me," James's voice was a whisper.

"You the Massa," Cap'n Jack said.

"I needed you!"

Cap'n Jack could hardly hear. "What good freedom to me now? I's too old.

Where c'n I go? What c'n I do? My life's here, Easter's here, all that's left of Annie."

"But you can stay here!" James lost his temper and yelled at the impassive man. "Free!"

Cap'n Jack stared at him. "Yes, Massa, I will stay," he said. "And every time you see me, every time you look at me, you will remember what you did to Annie, and the promise that you broke to me."

He left the room without being given leave. He left the house and walked to some quiet place under the trees. His hands were shivering, but it was not because of the fierce cold.

He had won. After all these years, he had his vengeance. But it gave him no joy. He couldn't understand why the taste in his mouth was so foul.

James was slumped at his desk, staring at nothing. The paper of manumission had fallen from his hand and fluttered to the floor.

in the spring, the stallion Glencoe arrived in New York. Glencoe stood slightly over fifteen hands, his color a rich, warm chestnut, with an elongated diamond star. His head was fine, his neck swanlike, and his muzzle pointed. He was the most famous horse in England, the pride of Ascot, and James had paid handsomely for him. When the ship that brought him across the Atlantic docked, hundreds of onlookers gathered, applauding in admiration as the magnificent animal was led down the gangplank, onto the pier and American soil. The press was fulsome in its praise of James, calling him the most successful importer of Thoroughbreds in American history. Glencoe, it was believed, would eclipse even Leviathan's performance. It was hoped that the arrival of the horse at his new home in Alabama would help speed his owner to a recovery of his good health.

For James was not well, He'd caught a chill in the spring and had not been able to shake it off. He had planned to be in New York to greet Glencoe, but after only two days on the journey had turned back, and taken to his bed. He had seemed to be recovering, when little Jamie, Tom and Elizabeth's new boy, died at only eight months from diphtheria. They had all grieved for the child, but the death of small children was a fact of their lives, and already Elizabeth was pregnant again. But James had taken it especially hard, and it had caused a physical relapse in him, The fever got worse; the congestion moved to his lungs. Sally was worried, but Dr. Hargreaves, who lived with the Simpson family in Florence, could find no especial cause for alarm.

"It is the process of growing old," he told Sally as they walked to his gig after a visit in July. "And he has never been hale.

Sally didn't agree. When she had first known James, all those years ago in Nashville, he had been as healthy a man as you could wish to meet. His frequent chills and bouts of minor illness had started around the time they moved to Florence, and Sally blamed the climate here, languid even in winter after the spikier weather of the Cumberland River. But none of her husband's chills and minor ailments had lasted as long as this.

Perhaps the doctor was right; perhaps they were simply growing old, although Sally did not feel it. Rheumatism bothered her in winter, and arthritis occasionally, but otherwise she was as fit as any woman in her forties could wish. James was eight years older. She felt a flash of resentment at the passing of time. He is not old, she wanted to shout at the doctor, but could not. James had already lived longer than many of his contemporaries.

"You should discourage him from strong drink," the doctor was saying, as he had said so many times, on so many visits, knowing James's fondness for port. "And make sure he gets plenty of rest and relaxation."

He left laudanum, in case the cough that bothered James got too troublesome, and promised to maintain his weekly visits, for he was doctor to the whole family, and advised on the health of the slaves.

Sally decided to take a stronger command of her husband's welfare. It wasn't just the chill that worried her. Sally had no immediate fear that he would die—he seemed to have a whole new zest for living since his return from Washington—but again, she had to face the prospect of his mortality, and she dreaded being left alone, without him. So many wives of her acquaintance had become widows, many much younger than she.

She knew that trying to stop James from keeping his finger on the pulse of his many business affairs would be an unwinnable war, but at least she could limit the attention he gave these matters, for their practical world was functioning smoothly, she knew. Cooper, the overseer of the new plantation at Panola in Mississippi, was a splendid fellow, who ran the estate as if it was his own, and Mitchell, the overseer here at The Forks, was thoroughly reliable, maintaining a clockwork efficiency, and if not actually liked by the slaves, he was

not too bitterly resented by them, Sally thought. Tom Kirkman was managing their business in land, and under James's direction was doing remarkably well.

So Sally decided that James could afford to be interrupted from the cares of the material world. Previously, she and the rest of the family had treated his study as a private world, to be entered only if invited, but now, after he had spent a couple of hours in there, she would sweep in unannounced, without even knocking, and demand that he spend a little time with her. What surprised her was that he didn't seem to mind, and would smile and put aside his papers, and join her on the veranda or in the garden or, on cooler evenings, in the warmth of the sitting room. On the hottest days, he would sit with her in the little sitting area of their bedroom upstairs, the windows open to catch a breeze.

Actively, she discouraged strangers or acquaintances from making too many visits, for she knew that most were simply calling on James for letters of introduction, or advice on local matters that others could have easily provided, or for loans. As actively, she would ask close associates to be sensible of his physical condition, to limit their demands on his attention, and to spend as much time discussing frivolous news as affairs of the nation. And as actively, she encouraged relations to call, especially any who had young children, for James, she knew, loved those distractions. In particular he adored the company of young Sam Kirkman, Elizabeth's surviving son, a studious boy with an intriguing ability to alleviate his own gravity by laughing at the seriousness with which he regarded life. Elizabeth's new pregnancy also delighted James, and he fussed over her, petted her, and would look longingly at Jass, wanting a grandson by him, Sally knew, for Elizabeth was not of his blood, and Thomas, her husband, only his nephew.

Still, it surprised her that James never seemed to mind these unprofitable claims on his attention, but welcomed them, whereas previously any intrusions into the hallowed world of his business dealings had been prohibited. What Sally could not know, for James never told her, was that he was weary of the empire he had created.

There were no challenges left. He had done everything, even more than he had ever dreamed of-, he was everything he had ever wanted to be. And he fell empty.

He could buy more land easily, he had the resources to create more plantations, but where was the challenge in that? He had more land already than several princes in Europe, and the acquisition of more held no delight for him. He saw the fevered speculation of the land boom that was flourishing around him and wished them all joy of it, but he wanted no part, for he had done that when young, and there were no frontiers to be tamed now, no wilderness to be put to the plow, only farms to be run, and farming bored him. There were no great political battles to be fought: The business of his state and of the United States was functioning smoothly, apart from its dealings with the remaining holdout Cherokee in Georgia, and James had abdicated any involvement in that. Andrew had left the presidency and was an invalid at the Hermitage, in the care of Alfred, while Martin Van Buren was leading the country on the exact path Andrew had defined, but without the zeal. The Mexican massacre of whites at the Alamo hardly seemed to touch him, nor did Sam Houston's surprising victory over Santa Ana at San Jacinto.

It was only a matter of time before the new Republic of Texas was admitted into the Union, for otherwise it would fall under the influence of Britain, and Washington would not allow that. With the inevitable shadow of civilization falling over Texas, the last great frontier of excitement was gone. Even the uncrossable Rockies had been conquered, and then there was only pastoral California, which James still dreamed of seeing but knew he never would.

There was nothing to do anymore, he had decided, which was another way of saying that he had ceased to be of any real importance to anyone but himself and his family. Whatever influence he might once have had over the affairs of his state, if not his nation, was now limited to his prestige and his signature, and even they were not necessary to anyone else's dreams.

. There are no great battles left, he thought, or none that have any use or need of me. I have become irrelevant.

Perhaps he was even irrelevant to his family, although not his wife. His daughters were all gone now, married with families of their own, and even though they were sweet to him and dutiful, he exercised no real authority over

their lives. The

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Trio, he knew, were good sons, but even though they loved him and obviously respected him, and though he loved them and could provide a father's advice and guidance, the future pattern of their lives was starting to emerge, and since The Forks would not be their future, they were already talking of lives beyond it.

Which left Jass. Jass the dutiful, Jass the caring, Jass the obedient second son who strove so valiantly to fill the empty shoes of the first, and who failed constantly, not because of any shortcomings on his own part but because his father's expectations of him were impossible to fulfill. Jass saw lightning as a wonder of nature, James thought, not as an immortal stallion to tame and fide.

It was the mortal stallion, Glencoe, who thrilled James now, the horse who would outdistance Leviathan and secure James's place in the racing annals of his country, but it was a poor substitute, not even second best he knew, for the history books that might have recorded his achievements as they would Andrew's. And so he allowed himself to be distracted from the emptiness of his material world by the woman without whom he knew he could not, would not want to, live, and the darling grandson, the grave Sam, who seemed so determined to write his own future, and had some inkling, at least, of what lightning might be.

But where is there left for him to play? James wondered in his darker moments. The plains of Olympus are gone, neatly furrowed by some giant plow, and all a boy can aspire to now is more of civilization.

Now, more than ever, he came to rely on Cap'n Jack. When the congestive fever was at its worst, it was Cap'n Jack who held a little bowl to his Massa's mouth to receive the phlegm. It was Cap'n Jack who changed the sheets on his bed when, as happened once, James soiled them, and Cap'n Jack who washed his Massa clean. It was Cap'n Jack who wiped the sweat from his fevered Massa's brow, Cap'n Jack who fed him soup when he was too weak to feed himself. It was Cap'n Jack who carried his Massa downstairs and up to bed

when he could not manage the staircase on his own. It was Cap'n Jack who sat with him, Alfred to his Andrew, for endless hours, always there to see an order carried out or a wish fulfilled.

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With the awful abscess of vengeance lanced and healed, Cap'n Jack now felt only a total emptiness. The thing that had so obsessed him, that had given him the will to live, was replaced by the surprising realization he found in a tiny corner of his heart: James was Cap'n Jack's best friend.

It was Cap'n Jack who took his Massa to the stables, when he was feeling better, to see the arrival of the new stallion. They sat with Murdoch and Monkey Simon, too old to race now, too valuable to sell, and dreamed of the winners Glencoe would sire, and of the old races they had won in the days of their youth. They would sit together on the veranda, the ol'

Massa and the slave, and talk endlessly of the days in Nashville, and of the fun it had been. They seldom mentioned the move to Alabama, they never talked about Annie, but James delighted in news of Easter, and would have the girl brought to him, and would spoil her with silly treats of candy, and once a new frock.

It was Cap'n Jack who sang lullabys as James drifted to sleep, and slept himself on a palliasse at the foot of his Massa's bed, in case he should be needed in the night.

Frequently, at night or when he dozed in the afternoons, James dreamed of Ireland, an Ireland of his memory, that gave him no desire to return to the country of his birth, for what he dreamed of was gone, he knew, scythed by the passing years. He dreamed instead of playing in the fields of his youth.

Of Carrickmacross and Ballybay, not as they might be now but as he remembered them. Of Jugs and old Quinn. Of poteen and soda bread, and peat fires on misty mornings. Of rainwashed fields and white-walled cottages. Of lowering skies and breaking sunlight. Of croppies, hare hunts, and hurley. Of

swirling fogs and shrouded legends. Of superstitious priests, storytelling shanachies, and pole-vaulting messengers.

And of Sean. Blessedly, kind, unvengeful death had not added a moment to Sean's years and he was now, in James's dreams, what he had always been, laughing, golden, riding rainbows,

Sometimes, too, he would dream of leprechauns, and if one of them looked exactly like Andrew, it was the generous Andrew of his youth, and he would take a little dust from the pouch at his side and sprinkle it on James, and James would

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be riding the rainbow too, sparkling with the magic powder, riding through iridescent, prismatic light, the primary colors of life, down toward the crock of gold that nestled, as the leprechaun told him, at the foot of the rainbow, faster and faster, falling toward the glittering prize that shone before him, failing, failing, until he knew that in a moment he would have it, the pot of fairy gold, the fabulous treasure that was beyond all reckoning. Falling, falling to a greater light whose source was only inches from his touch. But always before he reached it, he would wake up, and when he woke he was filled with a sense of loss, of something sought and not achieved, and the lack of it made him yearn to dream again.

Sometimes he would not find the leprechaun in his dreams, and he would be astride Glencoe, galloping across the dewsoft emerald grass toward a great city he knew was Dublin. Others would ride beside him for a while, on animals not as fine as his, and just as he recognized them and waved to them in cheery greeting, Lord Fitzgerald and Pamela, or Oliver Bond or Uncle Henry, Eleanor or Sara or Jugs, their horses would fail them, and they would fall behind. Then Sean would appear, galloping, laughing, always laughing, until he too could no longer keep pace with the reckless James, and would fall behind.

He would ride into Dublin, through shouting crowds, and all his friends would be there again, cheering with the mob, and James knew that he had just won a

tremendous race. As suddenly, everyone disappeared, and he would be alone in the empty streets of the city, searching for them, and riding down a tiny, dark alley that led, he was sure, to the Liberties, the decrepit slums where all his friends were hiding. The houses would slowly give way to leafless trees and bushes ablaze with flowers, and he would find himself riding down avenues of endless, fragrant roses.

Those roses stayed with him in his waking hours; he could not rid his mind of the image that the missionary had conjured up. He could not bear to hear stories of the Indians trekking west, for all the news that reached him was of nothing but deprivation and starvation and death. He did not want to know about the new treaty made with the holdout Cherokee at New Echota, for however magnanimous it seemed to be on paper,

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he knew it could lead only to the same awful fate, and while he blocked from his mind the picture of another nation walking west to its doom, the image that replaced it was one of endless rows, here to the horizon, of withering, lifeless rosebushes.

Not even the recruitment of local young men for a small army out to drive the few remaining Lower Creek out of southern Alabama stirred James to any protest.

There is nothing I can do for them, he told himself. I did everything I could. Yet even as he said it, he knew how great was the lie.

William Perkins caught a more contagious disease than the congestive fever that was afflicting James. Eventually it would prove fatal to his financial wellbeing and his wife's physical health, but there was no preventive medicine for it. It was called Land Fever, and an epidemic of it had swept the frontier states. As ever more Indians were removed, more Indian land became available for white

more Indians were removed, more Indian land became available for white settlement, and more white settlers flooded in.

Perkins, a naturally cautious man, thought he was immune, but his wife's temperature soared as she heard the stories of the easy fortunes that were being made, and she communicated the virus to him. Perkins thought long and hard about a course of action, and finally made an eminently sensible decision. He asked the advice of Thomas Kirkman, who took him to see his father-in-law, his Uncle James.

James had several reasons for offering generous help. It is always flattering when a successful student asks his teacher for advice, and Perkins had sought out and listened to James when he first came to Florence, and had done well. Now he had money to invest, not a lot but enough, and wanted to make more, if only to make Lizzie's financial future, already secure,

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impregnable. James guessed that the redoubtable Becky Perkins had already made plans to spend a good portion of whatever profit was made, but she amused him, and he loved to hear the gently told tales of marital woe from the henpecked husband. And then there was Lizzie.

For whatever reason, James still cherished the notion that Jass and Lizzie would wed, and the constancy of their friendship gave him continuing hope. He gave Perkins some good advice, told Thomas to keep an eye on him, and wrote a couple of letters to influential friends.

It worked like a charm. Perkins was offered and bought shares in a new development company, and within three months had doubled his money. Under Thomas's direction he also bought four lots in Tennessee, and within the same period sold them at four times their original cost.

There was no stopping him now. Caution to the winds, and, increasingly against Thomas's advice, he bought land wherever he could find it for sale, only to sell it again, almost always at some profit. It was as if he had suddenly

discovered the secret of Midas, and as his reputation for canniness increased, so did his profit, for it was generally reckoned that if he bought land, it was going to double in value overnight, which, in many cases, it did. Speculators, bankers, and simple settlers all rushed to the developments with which Perkins was associated, and it made him, for a time at least, something of a celebrity, and gave him a formidably increased bank account.

The new money provided Mrs. Perkins with the fuel for her most extravagant dreams, which she indulged with increasing ostentation. They owned over eighty slaves on a plantation that needed fewer than half that number. Where she had once been Becky to her friends, she now preferred her given name, Pocahontas, and she began to dress in the Oriental style made popular by Dolley Madison years before, turbaned and overly bejeweled. The dinners she gave were famous for the sumptuous table she served and the troops of attendants she provided, a footman to every chair. She traveled, if only to visit near friends, with a considerable retinue of footmen and lackeys and page boys. This vulgar display of wealth made her unwelcome to some of her less fortunate friends, and an object of derision to the more successful, and so the tolerant Jacksons

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were called upon at least once a week. William Perkins would sit in the Study with James, supposedly seeking more counsel, but actually unburdening himself about his wife's demanding excesses. James, amused and astonished by

his protégé's success, gave frequent warnings of prudence, which Perkins accepted miserably, for his success terrified him.

"There is nothing I can do," he said sadly. "They throw the money at me."

James knew it was true, for he remembered the panic buying that had attended the sales of the Cypress Land Company, and while Perkins's profits were not quite in that league, they were still very handsome.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Perkins was perpetual shadow to Sally, wallowing in selfpity, weeping of the fool that Fortune had made her with this newfound fortune, and pouring out her grievances with the world. She understood that the new unfriendliness of so many of her neighbors was caused by "the greeneyed

god,” but it still hurt, and she couldn’t pretend she didn’t have money. Not when every coup of William’s was broadcast in the newspapers, journals, and taverns as they happened. Nor was it her fault that William had been so astute in business, and they so obtuse. No one, it

seemed, understood the problems that fame and fortune brought with them, and she had only dear Sally to turn to for advice. Not the least of her difficulties was disciplining the army of nigras she commanded.

Lizzie called at The Forks more frequently than even her parents, and came because she wanted to see Jass.

Her parents’ newly increased wealth, and perhaps time, had calmed Lizzie.

Still an exemplary Southern belle, she had started to develop a morbid fear that she was going to be left on the shelf. At any social gathering, at any picnic, ball, or levee, Lizzie was, at the beginning of the occasion, the center of attention, but she had begun to see that it was not because anybody actually liked her, but because she wasn’t dull. All the most eligible young men would flirt with her, flatter her, and laugh at her jokes at the beginning of the evening, but as if they were passing the time with her until they were able to ascertain which young lady it was that they really wanted to be with or, in the case of the less bold, had summoned up enough Southern courage from Lizzie to approach the actual

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object of their affections. Even worse, Lizzie could not avoid the conviction that people were laughing at her behind her back-once they had done laughing about her mother.

She dared not voice these fears to her mother, from whom she had learned her patterns of behavior, and anyway, how could you tell your mother what the world thought of her? She could not talk to her father because he would have been hurt, and she had seldom received sensible advice from her father on anything that really mattered, only the dictum “Talk to your mother.” If she had friends she trusted, she might have confided in them, but Lizzie looked at her long list of acquaintances and realized that she didn’t have any friends she would

trust with such confidences.

Instead she took a long, hard look in the mirror, and tried to work out what it was she was doing wrong.

She was pretty, she could see, but so strong was her new fear, she could also see that she wasn't actually much more than pretty, as were most girls of her age. Certainly she was not flowering into any great beauty.

Her nose was longer than it should be, her lips were thin, and there was a kind of bland ordinariness to her features. She tried to laugh flippantly at the image in the mirror, but in a moment of remarkable selfappraisal for one who was still quite young, she saw that most of her elaborately cultivated mannerisms simply made her look silly.

Then the most awful truth of all appeared in the mirror. She had always understood, or been taught by her mother, that boredom was a maiden's lot, and so Lizzie had endured her boredom, thinking everyone else was doing the same. Her reflection told her she wasn't bored at all. She was lonely.

A lifetime of that loneliness suddenly yawned in front of her. She considered the potential young men who might alleviate the terrifying prospect, and it dawned on her that her card was seldom filled in after the first three dances, and then only by older men, married men or relatives, who might have been taking pity on her. Toward the end of the evening Lizzie would always find herself sitting on the sidelines with the older women and, heaven forfend, the spinsters.

Perhaps it was this knowledge that she was not the most desirable catch around that made her more determined than

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ever to catch Jass, but there was something deeper to it. As she became less brittle, she found herself liking Jass more. She no longer bothered about her parents' obvious desire for her to make a good union; she was motivated by something more intensely personal. She wanted to be with Jass because when she was with him, she wasn't lonely.

There was another reason why Lizzie enjoyed going to The Forks of Cypress, and that was James. Lizzie was acutely aware of how ridiculous her mother looked, with her stupid entourage, and couldn't understand why her father didn't put some curb on the extravagance. The mirror told her why. Lizzie had not only subjected herself to the scrutiny of honesty, she had done the same for her parents. Her mother's vanity and desperate need to prove her worth and social standing now struck Lizzie as silly, and her father's subservient acquiescence to whatever her mother demanded seemed pathetic.

This created a void in Lizzie's life, for she had a strong need of paternal guidance, and what was lacking for her in her own father she found in James. She would sit with him for hours, reading to him, or chatting, delighting him with scurrilous gossip of the small town that was their world, entertaining him, pampering him, and even gently flirting with him.

Free of the constraints of family behavior, she dazzled him, for with him she could be what she had been trained to be all her life, the perfect Southern rose.

James came to adore her, and looked forward to her visits with a special sparkle of excitement that almost no one else could arouse. He became jealous of her time, and especially of any time she spent with Jass, as if the father were rival to the son. At the same time, unaware of the contradiction, he encouraged Jass to see more of Lizzie, convinced of their suitability for one another. Lizzie, James thought, could give Jass the edge that he needed, for beneath her magnolia exterior was a determination of iron.

Sally was suspicious of this new Lizzie at first, believing she was cultivating James in order to cement the idea of a union with Jass, but she could not easily ignore the evident affection that the two developed for each other. Sally was sure her first impressions of Lizzie had not been wrong, but obviously she was making a conscious effort to improve herself,

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which Sally applauded. She doubted that she and Lizzie would ever be close friends, but she was pleasant company now and, given the wretched excesses of her mother's behavior, deserved ten out of ten for effort, at least.

Sally disRed cattiness in other women, and controlled any small tendency to it in herself, but occasionally she would give vent to a tinge of what she called “womanly smugness.”

Perhaps Lizzie has realized she isn’t such a catch after all, Sally thought, and has decided the rest of us are tolerable company.

Jass, on the other hand, was becoming more and more of a catch, “a strapping young man” was the way Aunt Letitia described him, and no one was more aware of this than Easter.

She adored him. She wanted to be with him for ever and ever, and it distressed her that she was seeing him less and less. He still came to the weaving house almost every day, but she thought it was from habit rather than from any real desire to be with her, because the familiarity that had once come naturally to both of them they now had to strive for. It wasn’t easy anymore. He still sat in the old rocking chair at the end of the day, and puffed on the cob pipe, and talked about the world, but he avoided any physical closeness, and because there was this unspoken barrier between them, a limitation had developed in the way they talked to each other.

Often he was silent for long periods of time, while Easter worked, and if she asked him what was wrong, he’d shrug and say nothing was wrong, or that she would not understand. Easter was convinced she understood only too well. In the old days he would have talked about anything with her, but now he had secrets, if only in one area. He would never talk about his feelings toward Lizzie, and the less he said, the more Easter wanted to know.

That Lizzie was becoming more and more of a fixture in Jass’s life was evident to everyone on the plantation. They rode together two or three times a week, laughed and joked together, and Jass delighted in showing her every aspect of the estate. If ever Lizzie expressed boredom with the details of farm life, Jass would laugh and say, quite loudly, that since she would be mistress of a plantation one day, she should learn

how they were run. He never said that she would be mistress of this plantation, but the current view among the slaves was that it was only a matter of time. Parson Dick confirmed this to Tiara when he told her that at

meals she took in the big house, Lizzie sat on ol' Massa's right, and behaved as if she were already mistress.

"They gwine be married one day," Tiara said to Easter when they were sitting outside Tiara's shack one evening. Easter lost her temper, called Tiara an ol' bitch, burst into tears, and ran away to the weaving house.

Tiara took it in her stride, nodded sagely, and looked at Cap'n Jack.

"That gal bustin' her heart for summat she cain't ever have," she opined, and from then on all the younger slave girls would giggle and whisper amongst themselves whenever Jass went to the weaving house.

Easter tried to talk about it with Cap'n Jack, but she'd seen little of him that summer; he was always in the big house nursing the ol' Massa. He spent what few hours he could with her, and she asked him about Jass and Lizzie.

Cap'n Jack shrugged. "Ol' Massa want it to be," he said, "but young Massa ain't made his mind up."

He laughed. "Wait till young Massa go Up South to college," he wheezed. "He gonna find girls there put Miss Lizzie in the shade of the ol' oak tree."

Which made Easter more miserable than ever. Cap'n Jack knew this, but didn't try to soften the blow.

"Young Massas gotta try all the food on the table afore they decide what they wants for dinner," he said. "An' mos' times they gwine pick white meat, not dark."

Any dreams Cap'n Jack once had that Jass might sweep Easter up to the big house as his true beloved were now forgotten. It wasn't going to happen.

It

was still possible that Jass would want to have Easter one day-for a night, or a week, or a while-but that would be all, and given the increasing separation he saw between them, he doubted even that. Nor did he care.

There had been too many wasted years of pain and bitterness in his life, and now he just wanted everyone to be happy, or as happy as the circumstances of their lives would permit. That his daughter clearly was not happy distressed him, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

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Even the sweet dream of freedom for himself and his people that had once flourished so strongly in his heart now seemed to Cap'n Jack impossible, and certainly not something he would ever see in his lifetime.

"Don't waste yo' life dreamin' on things yo' cain't ever have," he said, stroking his daughter's hair.

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One sultry morning in August, James felt remarkably better. The fever had left him, his lungs were clear, and the promise of the sweltering day invigorated him instead of bringing its usual enervation.

He dressed with Cap'n Jack's help, thanked the slave for his loyal attention, and dismissed him for the day. Cap'n Jack was reluctant to leave, but James insisted. "Have some time to yourself-, you've seen enough of me," he said with a smile, "and surely I have seen enough of you." Cap'n Jack accepted the joke in good part, and went down to the kitchen, where Julie made him a large plate of

sausage, gravy, and grits.

James breakfasted with Sally and Jass in a buoyant mood that thrilled Sally and cheered Jass. The Trio were staying with friends near Charleston for a seaside summer, which Jass might have enjoyed, but he had chosen to study instead. Fewer relations were visiting this year, if only because the older relations were becoming fewer, or older, and less inclined to travel, and the younger had other, newer relatives to nurture. Father and son talked with a lack of reserve that Jass found unusual but welcome, and joked about Mrs. Perkins's latest extravagance, a little slave boy, jet black and exotically costumed, whose only duty in life was to follow Pocahontas wherever she went with a large ostrich-feather fan,

Breakfast done, Sally and Jass went their separate ways, Sally to spend the day indoors, sorting out last summer's preserves and bottled fruit with Parson Dick, for the cellar was

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the coolest room in the house, and Jass to a day of riding and swimming.

James sat at the head of the empty table, and nodded to Parson Dick that Polly could clear things away.

James seemed lost in thought, and Parson Dick lingered, in case he was not fully recovered from his illness, or to see if anything was needed.

After a few moments, Parson Dick coughed gently, to let his Massa know he was still there. James looked at him, as if surprised he was not alone.

"Thank you, Parson Dick," he said. Now Parson Dick was surprised. It was not a dismissal.

"Sir?" he said.

"Thank you," James said again, and left the room.

Parson Dick was puzzled, convinced that something was amiss. He told himself it was not his place to interfere and went off to a day of inventory with Sally.

James went upstairs and changed into his riding clothes. It was so nice to be alone. Much as he loved Sally, much as he depended on Cap'n Jack, much as

he needed someone when he was ill, the lack of any moments of solitude irritated him. He couldn't even fart in private, he told himself, and dressed in his riding clothes, he went downstairs and out of the house.

"Saddle Glencoe," he told Murdoch.

Murdoch was surprised and reluctant. The horse had only recently arrived, was still settling in; it was unwise to disturb such a fine specimen. He presented the list of excuses, and James listened abstractedly. What Murdoch did not say was that he didn't trust James to ride Glencoe. He wasn't a good enough rider.

Suddenly James, bored with procrastination, turned on Murdoch.

"I am the Master here!" he roared in what seemed like fury but was actually only an urgent communication of a desperate need.

Murdoch saw no point in arguing if the man was in such a foul mood. He was the Master. He paid Murdoch's wages. He'd paid a small fortune for the horse. He had a right to ride it if he wanted to. He could do anything with it if he wanted to. He could kill it if he wanted to.

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Any damage done to the horse would only be small and would mend, Murdoch prayed fervently, saddling Glencoe himself. It felt wonderful to be astride this, his most famous possession. James trotted Glencoe around the yard, knowing that every man present was watching him, even Monkey Jack, who had

once been one of the greatest jockeys in America and the first to put Glencoe through his paces. James was riding him now.

I am the Master, he thought again. This is my horse. He will do as I bid.

He spurred the horse to a canter and headed for the track. Murdoch watched in aggravation, but kept his silence.

James could feel the gathering power of his mount and urged him to a gallop. Hard and fast he rode, and it should have been wonderful, but James felt only an increasing frustration. It was not enough. He had to know more. He had to know what it was like to take the animal to its fullest potential. He had to know what it felt like to be true master of the most famous horse in the world.

He saw the low fence ahead that separated the track from the drive, and he remembered Jass taking that fence every day on his return from school.

He told himself that if his son could do it, he could do it.

He headed straight for the fence. Murdoch closed his eyes. Monkey Jack watched in silence, not sure if he wanted his Massa to fail, which might hurt the horse, or succeed, because then he might not stop and the horse might be hurt more.

James and Glencoe cleared the fence easily, exquisitely, elegantly, the horse landing surefooted on the other side.

They had momentum now. Their blood was up, and they could not stop there, nor did either of them, man or beast, have any desire to do so.

Murdoch was furious. "Tell Missy Sally," he ordered Ephraim. "And Cap'n Jack."

Ephraim took off running for the big house. Murdoch went to saddle another horse, to go looking for his endangered charge.

Sally, in the cellar with Parson Dick, had no idea of the commotion at the stables.

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Pattie, changing sheets in Jass's room, glanced out of the window and saw them, and was surprised, for she knew the ol' Massa was only up from his sickbed today.

"Wouldn't let my pappy do it," she said to no one, and went about her duties.

James knew it was wrong, knew he was breaking every rule in regard to the treatment of his precious horses-he'd written most of them himself-and he didn't care; it only added to the rollicking joy he felt. Free from the constraints of caution and prudence, they were racing now not against any mortal competitor but against the relentless passage of time. The weight of responsibility had fallen from James's shoulders and taken years from him, so that he felt like a boy again, errant and naughty and young,

"I can do anything," he called to no one as they galloped down the lane, and knew there was one more thing he needed. Before, he had simply wanted to do something wild, something that would give him a joy in living again, but now he had a purpose.

He slowed the horse to a canter, looked about, then directed the horse off the lane and into the fields of the plantation.

It was not a fence, although it fenced in a large paddock that was being allowed to lie fallow; it was a hedgerow, unattended over the years, and now rambling and unruly and more than a tall man high.

James kept his distance from it, looking at it, considering it, and Glencoe snorted and stamped and pawed the ground, as if in anticipation of some real adventure.

James knew the jump was too high, and he didn't care. He knew he could harm the animal, and he didn't care. He knew he could hurt, or even kill, himself, and he didn't care, for he was not of this time and place. He was on an Olympian plain with only this Promethean creature and a formidable challenge, and the bridge between the horse and the challenge was himself.

"We can do it," he said to the horse, knowing the horse already knew, sweating, steaming, nostrils flaring, urgently restless, as if after a lifetime of controlled and perfect discipline this moment of triumphant freedom was unbearably precious to him.

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"I can do it," said James. He kicked the horse on. The sound of thunder rang in his ears, as the horse pounded to the challenge.

"I can do it!" James cried as the horse left the ground and soared over the fence. Flying now, flying on a great streak of lightning, riding now, riding on any rainbow and arching to the ground.

"I can do anything!" James yelled at heaven, as the horse landed flawlessly on the other side.

They looked a dejected pair as they walked up the great drive home, but it was only exhaustion. They were partners, James and Glencoe, in a conspiracy of freedom. Stable hands came running to them to take charge, but James stayed mounted and walked the animal up the little hill to the house.

They were all there, as he knew they would be, Sally and Cap'n Jack, the house slaves and Parson Dick. Even Mitchell the overseer. What did he have to do with it all? And Murdoch, who had lost the trail and had returned here.

"Time to face the music," he whispered to Glencoe as he slid to the ground and allowed Ephraim to lead the animal away.

He was tired, he wanted to go to bed, and he wondered why there had to be a fuss. Murdoch spoke first, as was proper.

"That was very wrong, sir," he said. "Happily the animal is not hanned, but I could not continue to serve you if it happened again."

James took the lecture in good part. "It's all fight, Murdoch. It was very wrong, and it will not happen again," he promised. "I am sorry.

Perhaps you should see to Glencoe."

Murdoch accepted the apology, but with bad grace, and stomped away. James determined to go to him later and try to make him understand, but he couldn't do it now, he was so very, very tired.

Sally started to speak, but James interrupted her, because suddenly something of desperate urgency needed to be done.

"Fetch my son," he said.

He fell to the ground. Sally cried out and ran to him, but Cap'n Jack got to him first, gathered him up in his arms, and took him into the house.

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Sally led them into the sitting room, and Cap'n Jack laid his Massa on a sofa, loosened his collar, and told Parson Dick, who had followed them, to bring water.

James was ashen gray, his breathing shafflow. Sally was terrified, for she had seen death often enough to know the shadow was passing over her husband. "Send someone for Hargreaves," she ordered Cap'n Jack, praying that help might arrive in time. Mitchell, hovering in the doorway, unsure of his place, hurried away to fetch the doctor.

Cap'n Jack felt James clutching at his hand. "Jass," James whispered.

"Get Jass."

Sally nodded to Cap'n Jack, but James would not let go of his hand, for perhaps Jass would not come in time. He had to make them see, he had to make them understand, there was something Jass had to know, and it mattered to him

more than anything in all the world, even more, at that moment, than his life.

“Jass,” he said again. “Tell him-”

He couldn’t finish. Why was it so hard to say? It was so simple, he’d known it for years. Why was it so difficult for him now?

“There is God,” he gasped, but Sally stroked his brow.

“Hush, my dear,” she said. “We all believe in God. Rest—

“No! ” James managed to cry, for that wasn’t it. “There is God—

How could he make them understand? He saw Cap’n Jack’s hand clasped in his own, the black on white, and thought that might be a way. There was so little time. He held the slave’s hand close to his wife’s face.

“There is God,” he managed to whisper, and fell back against the headrest. Cap’n Jack leaned in close. James whispered something more.

Cap’n Jack thought he heard the word “everyone,” but wasn’t sure. He leaned closer again.

James was smiling at him. The smile never left his face, but Cap’n Jack knew that his soul had left his body. He was there and then he was not there, and Cap’n Jack would never be able to pinpoint the moment of departure with any accuracy.

He looked at Sally, and told her what she already knew.

“He gone, Missus,” he said.

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Sally closed her eyes. She wanted to grab hold of her husband and drag him back from wherever it was that he had gone, but she knew he wouldn’t come. She wanted to cry out, to make him hear ~er, wherever he was, and come back to

her from that awful place, but she knew he would not hear her.

She didn't cry out; she whispered an order to the slave instead: "Fetch the Master."

41

Jass swam easily in the flowing stream. Although it had been a warm summer, the creek water was still cool and refreshing, caressing his naked body as ice calms a bum, the gentle pressure of the current soothing his muscles, tense from a hard ride on Morgan.

The unspeakable happened, not from any immediate sexual need but the continuous pressure of the surrounding element. Jass was aware of it and indulged the sensation, swimming harder now, and recognizing the need that was being signaled that had to be filled.

For Jass was determined to lose his virginity before he went to college, which left him a year to achieve his ambition. All his classmates had told him, truthfully or otherwise, that they had taken the final step into the world of manhood, and laughed at Jass for his lack of initiative. Then he had received a vibrant letter from Wesley in Texas.

The western adventure had proved to be everything that Wesley had wanted.

He had joined Sam Houston's army, had fought in battles for the new republic, and was living the life of a young man's dreams. Following the model of his hero, Houston, he had abandoned European comforts and had taken two Comanche women in polygamous marriage. He had been made blood brother into their tribe, was learning the skills of a warrior, and had even scalped a man, a Mexican, in some small skirmish. But reading

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between the lines Jass could tell that Wesley had no sense of permanent

between the lines, Jass could tell that Wesley had no sense of permanent obligation to either woman but would abandon them if he was bored, or if some new horizon beckoned. Home was the prairie, their house a teepee, and he sang the glory of wild Texas. He had adopted the Lone Star Republic as his new country, and almost seemed to regret the political bartering that would eventually incorporate his new nation into his old. Now it is a challenge to any true man, he wrote. If it becomes part of the United States, those petty fellows from Washington will turn it into something as dull as the rest of the world.

The letter made Jass envious. Compared to the swashbuckling Wesley, he felt himself to be a callow, inexperienced boy who had not yet even been brave enough to take a woman, while Wesley had already savored all the delights that virile masculinity had to offer. He stopped swimming, climbed onto a flat rock, and stretched out to bask in the warmth of the sun and consider the possibilities.

Lizzie was not any part of the solution. He liked Lizzie very much, he wanted her in his life, and what he felt for her was something he wanted in his life, too. He didn't think it was love-he still didn't know what love was, or thought he didn't-but it was something positive, and he imagined that he and Lizzie would always be friends. He didn't have a lot of carnal thoughts about Lizzie, a few but not many, and when he did it was only to get his own back on her for a silly tiff they'd had, or because she would sometimes edge her way into his nocturnal dreams and there were few other white women he wanted to dream about.

Lizzie was a white woman of a certain class, a possible, potential bride, and, Jass imagined, a virgin, and he would no more have attempted to seduce any such woman than fly to the moon.

He had heard stories of a few white women of easy virtue who lived in Decatur, but they expected payment for their services, and Jass didn't want his first experience to be with someone like that.

This narrowed the field to nigras, which expanded the potential co-celebrants of his initiation to a remarkable number. Almost any black woman he chose to have was available to

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him, any of his own slave women, any of his friends' slave women, or any slave

women owned by strangers. In the two latter cases, the actual owner might cause a fuss, but if he asked that owner first, it was probable the permission would be granted. As to his own slaves, his power over them was such that he had only to snap his fingers and they had no choice but to lie down and open their legs to him. They could holler and protest for all they were worth, and it would do no good. He was their Massa, and as such had the right to dispose of them as he wished, and no court in the land would say otherwise.

Wesley had done it like that, although the girl had neither hollered nor protested, but had giggled along with it. Or so Wesley had said. Most of the others in his class claimed a similar experience, with varying degrees of willingness and submission among their conquests, and only Adam, two months Jass's senior, boasted, with considerable relish of whipping and raping a slave girl to achieve his end.

Jass didn't want it to be like that either, Jass wanted his first time to be an event of some moment in his life, not a quick shaft in a bam with an illiterate field girl, giggling or otherwise. He wanted a girl he could talk to, easily, seriously, intimately, or laugh with, and already he knew who she was. His problem was that he didn't know how to extend their relationship beyond simple friendship.

Because Jass wanted Easter. Perhaps he'd always wanted her, even before he knew what wanting her was, and he certainly wanted her that day he told her she could go to the wedding. God, he could have done it to her right then and there, rolling on the ground covered in those stupid wet sheets, and she wanted him, he knew it, he could tell from the look of her, the feel of her, the way her legs parted slightly as she felt his hardness pressing against her-He rolled off the rock into the stream, in case anyone was watching him, although he guessed he was alone at this tranquil bend in the river, his secret spot.

It was always the same when he thought of Easter-he got hard in a second-and when he was near her it was worse the sight of her, the touch of her, the very musk of her excited him to a point of inner turmoil that he had no idea how to

express, and so it was easier not to be near her.

They knew each other too well, he decided. They'd shared a lifetime of growing up together, but their relationship did not include the intimacy and importance he gave to the act of copulation, and he was concerned that any suggestion of it by him would make her think he was taking advantage of his authority over her. So he avoided Easter and found excuses for not being with her, when actually she was the person he wanted to be with all the time, more than anyone else in the world.

Nor could he discuss it with Cap'n Jack, because he couldn't imagine going to a man, even a slave, and saying, excuse me, but I want to do your daughter, which is what it boiled down to, no matter how nicely expressed. It wasn't the same as asking a father for his daughter's hand in marriage; he couldn't marry Easter, there was no future in any kind of relationship with her, even a physical one, but, oh, how he wanted her.

Lolling in the shallow water, he had no answer to the problem, which had been tormenting him for months, and he pushed himself toward the deeper water, to swim to the shore, in the hope that the exercise would clear his mind.

And he saw Easter sitting on the bank he was heading for, watching him.

His clothes were beside her, in a neat pile, where he had left them.

He stopped swimming and stood waist deep in the water. With any other slave, male or female, he would have had no embarrassment. It didn't matter if a slave saw the Massa na ked; he was still the Massa, clothed or unclothed, and inhibitions of prudery were reserved for people who did matter, people of one's own kind. Easter was different. Easter mattered to Jass.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Easter shrugged. "Watchin' you," she said. "Ain't no law agin it. "

"There is because I say so. Now clear off," he ordered, more sharply than usual because she had been on his mind.

Easter had decided on her own course of action. She sorely missed Jass's company and had come to see him now if only to be near him for a while, to tease him, to pretend it was still like it once was between them.

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"Coz you nekkid? Bet you'd let Miss Lizzie see you nekkid," she giggled.

Jass was slightly shocked. "Don't talk about Miss Perkins that way," he began, and Easter interrupted him.

"It's Miss Perkins this An' Miss Perkins that all the time these days,"

Easter said. "What happened to plain ol' Miss Lizzie?"

Jass was trying hard not to smile, for he had realized something obvious, something he should have understood before. Easter was jealous of Lizzie.

"You wouldn't understand—

Easter interrupted him again. "Oh, I unnerstan'," she said. "You got the fever fo' Miss Lizzie, an' never come se yo' po' Easter no mo'."

Jass wanted to giggle. It was going to be all right. This mild expression of both jealousy and lust by Easter had made it all right. It would be easy between them now.

Still, he had to play the game, to see where it would lead. "That's foul talk," he said, not meaning it, for it excited him to talk this way with Easter.

Easter knew it was all fight too, that they could be friends again now; she knew it from the tone of his voice, and the look in his eye. She loved playing games with Jass.

She grabbed his clothes, and threw them farther up the bank.

"Yo' c'n just cool off in that water a I'il whiles longer," she giggled.

“You bring my clothes back this minute,” he demanded, but the sense of fun in his voice gave him away, and Easter only laughed with him.

Jass began advancing, very slowly, out of the water, inch by inch revealing slightly more and more of his nakedness.

“I’ll whip your hide,” he called, grinning at her. “Wouldn’t be the first time,” Easter grinned back, making it clear she was ready to enjoy the experience.

It was now or never, Jass thought. One more step would reveal to Easter what Wesley called the family jewels, and Jass was ready to take that step when he heard a horse galloping toward them.

Easter heard it too, and turned in surprise. She saw the rider first, and turned back to Jass.

“It my Pappy,” she said.

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Cap’n Jack rode up to them and dismounted. He spoke sharply to his daughter, and she thought he was angry, but it was only because of the urgency and privacy of his business.

“Git yo’ tail outa here,” he ordered Easter.

She hesitated, a fraction too long, wondering why he was cross. She couldn’t imagine he was bothered that she was here with the naked Jass.

Her delay annoyed Cap’n Jack, and he smacked her, hard, on the rear.

“Do as I tell,” he roared. It shocked Easter—he hadn’t raised his hand to her in years—and she ran away quickly, slightly scared of him.

“What’s the matter, Cap’n Jack?” Jass asked with as much surprise. Cap’n Jack did not immediately reply. He looked around, saw Jass’s clothes and picked

them up, brought them to the water's edge.

"Get dressed, Massa," he said.

In that single, simple word, Jass knew what the matter was. Cap'n Jack always called him "Massa Jass" or, to other people, "young Massa." The use of the word "Massa" could mean only one thing.

Cold and lonely emotions that he had never experienced flooded Jass, of which the most stringent was fear-for himself and of his new responsibilities. He hardly remembered getting dressed, but did remember that his clothes felt as if they belonged to some other, younger man.

Cap'n Jack had turned his back while Jass dressed. He'd seen the boy naked many times, but Jass was not a boy anymore. He was in a position of ultimate and absolute authority over Cap'n Jack now, and his new role deserved this much respect. He sensed the cessation of movement from Jass and turned to him.

"Yo' Pappy dead, suh," he said. "Yo' the Massa now."

Jass stood stock-still, almost at attention, drawing on resources he didn't know he had. There was so much to do, and he was the authority for it all to be done.

"I sorry to be the one to tell yo'," Cap'n Jack said.

Jass blinked, and looked away to the river. What should he do first? he wondered.

"Thank you, Cap'n Jack," he said. "I'm glad it was you."

Still he stared at the river. The sense of an awful loss and a found burden was starting inside him.

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Cap'n Jack watched him carefully, sure that Jass would behave well but still

careful, in case his estimation was wrong.

For just a moment, that surging sense of loss absolutely overwhelmed Jass. He wanted to cry, and knew he could not. He clenched his fists till the nails broke the skin of his palms, and bit his lip, hard, and fought the tears furiously.

Somewhere deep inside Cap'n Jack another emotion raged just as furiously, for just as small a time. This boy owns me, he thought. I am a man, and this child owns me. For that brief moment, the bitter nail of bondage pierced clean through Cap'n Jack's heart. As immediately, the wound was healed by other considerations. I could have been free, his mind said.

I chose this path, and I will see it to its end.

As immediately, he knew that Jass had regained control of himself.

"Best see to yo' mammy now, Massa," he said.

Jass turned to him, not a boy anymore, nodded, and moved to his horse.

Slaves had carried the body of James to the Massa's bedroom. Sally sat beside the bed, her eyes closed, rocking gently, keening silently, waiting to give full vent to her grief until she had done what she had to do.

She was lost in a sea of silent grief and only a few specific sounds gave her any sense of direction, of finding a way toward tomorrow. She could hear Angel weeping softly just outside the door, and wondered why a slave should weep the death of a man who owned her. Through the open window, she could hear the sound of slaves in their quarters singing a spiritual, and that she understood. It was not an expression of their grief, but a calming of their fear, for they were in new and frightening territories, they had a new Massa, and things might be different now, and not necessarily for the better.

She heard the sound of horses in the drive, and then footsteps on the gravel, then the veranda and then the hall, and she knew what they meant.

She let go of her husband's hand, moved to the window, and stared out at nothing.

When Jass came into the room, he knew what he would see, but wanted to delay it for just one more tiny moment. He looked at his mother, and she looked at the bed. Do it, her

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eyes pleaded, get it done, and then I can be alone.

Jass went and sat beside his father. Sally had no desire to know what he was thinking, or what kind of goodbye he was saying to the man who had given him life. It was a private thing, between them, just as whatever goodbye she would say to the man she loved was a private thing to her, and need never be known by anyone else. It was not their business.

Jass knew he wanted to say something to his father, but couldn't think what, because this wasn't his father lying there. It wasn't anyone, it was simply a thing. Whatever his father was or had been was somewhere else now, or at least not here. He felt guilty that he didn't feel more involved in some way, and said a little prayer, in the hope that God would forgive him, and that wherever his real father was, he would be at peace.

After a little while, Sally knew that it was time to speak.

"He wanted to tell you something," she said. "I don't know what it was, but it was important to him. I think it was about God."

"I wish I'd been here," Jass said. He got up from the bed and went to his mother.

"I am so very sorry," he whispered.

Sally nodded. A single tear spurted out of her eye, just one, and fell to her cheek, like a little arrow failing to find an unknown target. She shook her head, almost angry with herself, and turned to Jass.

All the myriad things, the fears and hopes and dreams and worries and pride

and care that a mother feels for any of her children starting on a bold new journey flooded Sally's heart. He was too young for such an adventure.

The king is dead, long live the king.

"You are the Massa now," she said.

Jass turned away, and then looked back at her, but she had turned away from him. Whatever else they needed to say, whatever else they wanted to discuss, would have to wait. She had done what had to be done; now he had to do what he must. She had anointed him with her tears and ceded her life to him. to his care. To his responsibility. To his whim. Or to his caprice.

"Yes," he said, and left the room.

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It was done; she had nothing else to do. She could be alone with her grief. She went and sat beside James, lonelier than she had ever been in all her life, and wept.

They were all there, waiting in the hall for him to come downstairs. They had been there, waiting for this moment, when he arrived at the house, but duty demanded he do his business with his dead father and his living mother first, and they had pretended they were not there, had turned their backs as he strode into the house and walked up the stairs.

Now he was theirs, and they had assembled in a line in perfect pecking order. Mitchell, the overseer, was first. Murdoch, the trainer, was second-not because his was the second-best job, but because he was the second-ranking white. Parson Dick came next, followed by Julie, Angel, who was still crying, and then all the various house slaves. Cap'n Jack, because of his privileged and undefined position, and because he had already done his business, was not in the line but was outside, getting ready to greet the swarms of arrivals-the doctor first, and

relatives and undertakers and associates and friends come to pay their respects—who would descend on the house.

They heard the door shut, and all eyes turned to Jass as he came down the stairs, and all approved what they saw. The natural transfer of power that attends to any son when his father dies had already happened. Jass was years older than he had been a few minutes ago.

He came to the head of the line. Mitchell, hat in his hands, spoke first, for all of them.

“We are all very sad by your great loss,” he said, and then spoke for himself. “Hit was my pleasure to serve your father, sir, and hit’Id be my pleasure to serve you.”

“Thank you, Mitchell,” Jass said. He shook the overseer’s hand, and moved to Murdoch.

“I am truly sorry, sir, he was a fine man.” Murdoch was not lying. He held James in great regard. The events of the morning were all part of the job. “I look forward to serving you, sir.”

Jass shook his hand, and moved to Parson Dick. Slaves did not ask to be allowed to continue in their jobs, but the Massa had to be shown the proper respect.

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“My sincere condolences, sir.” Parson Dick bowed his head slightly, to hide a flash of angry resentment. Like Cap’n Jack, he had known Jass all his life, from puling infant to toddling boy to spotty youth and now this colt had complete ascendancy over him, owned him, lock, stock, and barrel, and could do whatever he wished with him. Because he was white.

Jass shook his hand too, which surprised the usually imperturbable Parson Dick, but Massas are Massas, and all are different, and all have their own

idiosyncrasies, and Parson Dick knew it was kindly meant.

Jass moved down the line, doing what had to be done, what was expected of him, and inside he was screaming, let me get out of here! Last in the line, a kitchen skivvy, a scrawny girl he didn't even know her name, Trixie perhaps-was overawed by the solemnity and ceremony, and as Jass moved to her, she screamed, threw her apron over her head, and ran away to hide in the pantry.

It broke the strained formality of the occasion, and made Jass want to giggle. Polly and Pattie ran after Trixie, Julie mumbled apologies, and Angel, listening on the stairs, had another bout of tears. Jass, suffocating, took the opportunity to escape. He turned away and walked quickly out of the house.

He strode across the lawn with no sense of direction; he had to be away from here, away from them all, away, somewhere, anywhere, where he could be alone. And not alone, because what he wanted, what he needed, was the opportunity to be completely himself, without considerations of what he had to do for other people, only the unconfining freedom to do what he knew he must do, for himself.

He knew where he was going, and he started to run. Field slaves, who had come close to the big house to be near the center of an important event in their lives, didn't try to speak to him, to stop him, for somehow they understood the urgency of his need, if not the need itself. A few doffed their hats, but otherwise they left him alone.

He ran with lung-bursting energy to the place where he had to be.

He burst in the door, slammed it behind him, and stood, panting not only from exhaustion, staring at her. Easter had

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been sitting at the loom, not to weave, but because she was comfortable sitting there, trying to work out what a future might be, if Jass might be different now that he was someone else, now that he had this new dominion over her. As soon as he came in, she knew why he was there, what he wanted, but it was uncharted sea for her, and she wasn't sure what she should say, or if she should say

anything.

His eyes told her not to speak. He looks so lonely, Easter thought, so old and young all at once, and she knew, without question or hesitation, where she had to be.

She moved to him and took him into her arms, and he folded into her engulfing embrace, like a child coming home. His mouth found hers, and her lips weren't enough. As if there was no other place it could be, his tongue touched hers and filled her yielding mouth and could find no barrier of resistance. She pushed her groin against his, and could feel that hardness she had felt once before, long ago, and had wanted with all her heart to feel again. Other new and wonderful emotions, sensations, longings, surged through Jass as his mouth moved down to her neck, his hands opened her bodice and her breasts were free to him, his at last that he had only dreamed of, and the reality was sweeter than he could have possibly imagined. He wanted the moment to peak now and to last forever.

He looked down at her breasts and then up into her eyes, and seemed to drown in them, but he knew the sea was deeper yet, and he had no desire to escape his fate. He put his hand to her face, and the contrast in colors shocked him, spurred him, inflamed him. It was what Wesley had promised, the white and the black, all sensual texture and lustrous desire.

He laid her down on the little cot, and lay astride her, kissing her still. His hands caressed her thighs and found their way under her skirt and petticoat by their own volition, it seemed, reaching upward, until suddenly he found the hot, wet warmth of his goal. She had unbuttoned his pants, and now he was free and it felt wonderful, flesh upon flesh, the colors of it dazzling him, flawless white on exquisite black and he wanted to lose himself forever in her sheening body.

Easter bit her lip in pain as he pushed inside her, ~pain upon pain, and ever more pain, until she might have screamed for

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him to stop, and then suddenly she exploded and there wasn't any more pain and she felt him hard inside her and she cried out at the wonder of it, rocking with him, meeting the thrust of his hips, until he cried out, and she could feel him

him, meeting the thrust of his hips, until he cried out, and she could feel him pulsing into her and she knew he had given her the sweetest gift it was in his power to give.

When it was done, he stayed inside her for a long time, moving only a little, to make them both more comfortable, side by side, still keeping her in his embrace. Easter was not sure what to do; she didn't want to move, but didn't know if he did, didn't know if it was her place, now that it was done, to give him some indication that he was not under any obligation to stay. She stiffed a little, as if to move away, but he increased the pressure of his embrace slightly, and she knew that she had no need to go, and that he had need of her to stay.

Moonlight bathed them, filtering in through the little window. They did not speak, for there was nothing that had to be said. Their faces were so close together she could feel his steady breathing, and she wondered if he was asleep. Then she felt a tiny trickle of moisture on her cheek, and she knew it was from him. She held him still, letting him cry, letting him mourn his dead father and could not know that he wept as much from joy at what he had found as grief for what he had lost.

When she knew he was not crying, she felt an urgent desire to express an emotion, but it was one she had never experienced before, a tender, dulcet emotion that began somewhere in the pit of her heart and drifted out of her as a moaning hum that became a lullaby. It never formed into a song, or any that she knew; there were no words to it, or none that seemed necessary, it was only a sound, the gentle primal sound of a mother lulling the fear of the dark from her child.

His breathing, already even, steadied some more, and he drifted to sleep.

Easter stayed awake for a while, lulling him still with the soft song.

The tears were still damp on his cheek, and she leaned to him, and kissed them away with her mouth. She settled back, her head resting on his shoulder, and stared at the vague outline of his face that the moonlight gave her, and then dozed for a while. He moved in his sleep, rolled

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toward her, and she, only half conscious, moved with him, until her back was pressed against him and she was gathered into his slumbering embrace.

Toward dawn he stirred, and caressed her gently, and she woke to the hardness of him against her. She turned to him, and he stroked her and kissed her, sweetly, gently, softly, for a while; then he moved astride her and, without any urgency, went inside her again, to the place that both of them wanted him to be.

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They became lovers in the purest sense, in that all they had was their love. Their past was both a foundation and an irrelevance, and they had no possibility of a future. All they had was now.

. They lived according to the manners and mores of their place and time-he was Massa of a great estate and she his slave. Separately, they went about their separate business. Except by chance, Jass never saw her in his other life, but lived in the bosom of his white family, adjusting to his new status, counseled by friends, besought by his father's associates.

Easter spent her life without him as though nothing had changed between them, although the greatest change was in her. Secure in the knowledge of his love, she lost all sense of jealousy or ambition. She had everything she wanted; now was everything she wanted to be, except for the one thing he could give that might make her life complete. Brought up to a clear knowledge of the reality of her situation, she harbored no ambitions to be mistress of the big house, for it scared her, had no yearning for elaborate gowns or grand functions, or visits to other places, for since her journey to Nashville, these frightened her too.

Alone among the slaves at The Forks of Cypress, and any others of her acquaintance, she had no wish to be free-that was the most terrifying prospect of all, because the

gain of it might mean the loss of something infinitely more precious to her. Already she knew she could not have some of him, that other him, but that was no more than she had always known. She knew he must be married one day, to a white woman, but so strong was her love that this caused her no concern. She had no desire to keep house for him, or care for him, except in those few hours when he was hers, and then she was content with as much as he was able to give. The only little gift she wanted from him now was the simplest, cheapest, most dear thing it was in his power to bestow: a child, not to bind him to her but to have a part of him, the best of him, so that wherever he might go, even if he should, which she did not for one moment consider, leave her.

They moved in parallel but separate directions, without the desire or ability to acknowledge each other, to each ' other or to the world. But late in the afternoon, he would come to her, and they would sit for a time, often not talking, he in his old rocking chair, puffing on his pipe, she at her loom, her senses reveling in the nearness of him, the security of him, content with what she had, and when he did talk, listening to his opinions or his problems or, to make her laugh, his gossip, and she would offer advice if she felt able, and smile at his jokes, and nurse his body or his heart if either needed attention. The most precious time of all was the night, when their other worlds were sleeping, and he came to the weaving house. It might have been the smallest hovel of his kingdom, but it was the one place where he could be free of newfound responsibility, the one place where the burden of decision that sometimes he felt inadequate to bear was taken from him, and he could simply be Jass again. So to him it was a castle, and she his triumphant queen.

They told no one, but everyone knew. Cap'n Jack had not slept at the weaving house the night old Massa died, for he knew Jass was there, but had found a disused cabin at the slave quarters and had made it his new home. Easter cleaned and sometimes cooked for him, or Tiara would, but the new domestic arrangements were only occasionally discussed. At night, when the slaves were gathered round the campfire enjoying the few moments when they were their own masters,

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some of them would rib Cap'n Jack about his daughter and the Massa, but Cap'n Jack only smiled, for everything was coming to pass as it should.

Some of the younger men thought it was an insult, the Massa taking advantage of a slave, but their elders shrugged. It was, to most of them, inevitable. Jass and Easter had been inseparable as children, and now, it seemed, would be inseparable as adults, and as Tiara insisted, "it was nat'chrel."

Sally thought it inevitable too, and said nothing. Despite any reservations she had once had about the possibility of this relationship, now she was glad of it. She had seen Jass take a premature leap from heir to Massa, and saw that he was faltering, awed by the immensity of what was now his, and the fact that he was finding some brief hours of careless happiness each day, that he had a friend who expected nothing from him, was sweet to her.

It was Sally who raised the question of college. They were at dinner, Jass sitting at the head of the table, and the Trio were in a gleeful mood.

"But it isn't possible," Jass said. "There's too much to do here."

Sally, watching him assume a role he was not quite ready for, didn't agree.

"Nonsense," she said. "The plantation is running very smoothly. Mitchell has things well in hand here, and Tom and I can make any major decisions."

With your authority, of course.

The Trio were all in favor, and dreamed of the devilment they could get into if Jass were away.

"Of course, it's your decision," said Sally. "But I think it might be good for you. It would give you"-she chose her words carefully-

breathing space.”

Jass was silent for a while, and toyed with his food. After the death of James, he had abandoned the idea of college, believing it was his duty to run The Forks of Cypress. But too often he felt overwhelmed by his role. The holdings were so extensive, and so complex, he relied completely on the advice of his mother, and his cousin (brother-in-law?) Tom Kirkman,

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or the overseer, and he wondered how his father had been able to keep track of it all. Tom seemed to understand all the nooks and crannies, and had suggested that when the prices were right, they reduce some of the unwieldy estate. The plantation in Missouri was up for sale, and Colonel Elliot had offered to buy the stud farm in Nashville. Tom took charge of these negotiations, and often Jass felt as if he were in the way, or unnecessary, but the responsibility for the many lives under his dominion, and the ultimate right of decision, caused him sleepless nights. Sally knew this, and believed that he had the right to the days of youth. A.J.

would have been well into his twenties when James died, but Jass was only in his teens. She hoped that college would give him the respite that he needed, allow him time to grow.

Jass was thrilled by the idea. He still had a young man’s wanderlust, and while New Jersey wasn’t quite the same as California, at least it was a journey. He knew a degree was completely unnecessary to his future, but it might give him a sense of achievement. More than everything else, he thought it would be fun.

“And you can take a slave,” William said. “To look after you. I’m going to take Ephraim when I go, to look after my horse. -

Then he remembered himself. “If that’s all fight with you, of course.”

Jass smiled his assent.

“You could take Easter,” George giggled. “She’d really look after you.”

“Don’t be foul.” Jass was stem, but amused by them. “Of course I’d take Cap’n Jack.”

“But what will Easter do for four years?” asked Alexander. “She’ll get awfully lonely.”

“I could look after that,” said William cheekily, and winked at his brothers, who fell into fits of laughter.

His mother was furious. The relationship between Jass and Easter was never discussed, or even mentioned, in the house. “If you can’t control your tongue, you’d better go to your room,” she said.

“Sorry, Mamma.” William didn’t look remotely sorry, and George had the devil in him.

“More to the point,” he said, “what will you do about Lizzie?”

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Jass looked at Sally. He had no idea what he was going to do about Lizzie, whether he went to college or not.

Lizzie was a major part of Jass’s problems, for she had taken James’s death hard. He had come to represent the father figure she so sorely needed, and she transferred many of her emotional requirements to Jass, making demands of him that he was incapable of fulfilling. She wanted paternal authority and youthful suitor all in one. She deferred to him in all aspects, but constantly tried to exact decisions of him about her life, which, Jass thought, were not his to make. She was forever offering him unwanted advice about the plantation, and his affairs, and most of all, his perceived position, until Jass could hardly bear to be with her.

Then she would change, or her idea of him would, and she would become the coquette, the silly, flirtatious Lizzie of old. And this, compared with the tranquil calm of Easter, was even more infuriating to Jass. Then she might weep, and insist he didn't love her, which confused Jass since love had never been mentioned between them. But long ago he had asked permission to call on her, which was, within their world, something of a commitment, which Jass felt honor-bound to fulfill. He had to consider marriage, for he had to have children. Much as he loved his brothers, The Forks of Cypress was his, and he wanted it to pass to his son, and his son's sons, and if nothing else, he wanted to prove his manhood. To provide a new heir of direct lineage was the simplest thing that he could do, and the most profound, even if he floundered in all other aspects of his authority.

Nor could he think of another white woman who interested him more than Lizzie, for he was most eligible, and he had no shortage of applicants for his hand.

The simple truth was that Jass had very little interest in white women on a sexual basis. The coffee skin of Easter so entranced him, so beguiled him, so excited him that, like Wesley, paler beauty hardly stirred him.

Once you go black, you never go back. Midnight velvet. All the schoolboy jokes about black women danced in his mind. It's true, he thought, it's true. Even now, sitting at dinner with his family, he wanted to be away, to be with Easter, to lose himself in that wondrous body.

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He told her afterward. They made love, and lay together in the little shack, and he told her he would be away for four years. The vacation breaks would be too short, and the journey too long, to allow him to travel such a distance home.

"You'll be all right," he said. "You'll be looked after. If there's anything you need, you only have to ask."

She was silent for a long time, and he knew she was crying, although no

sound or movement betrayed her.- He held her close.

“And then I’ll come home,” he said later, when he knew she was calm. “And I’ll never go away again.”

Still she didn’t speak.

“It won’t be for another few months,” he whispered, “but if there’s anything you want, anything I can do for you before I go-”

She said something then, but so softly he could hardly hear. But he knew what it was, for she said it often, gently when they caressed, or crying it out when they made love.

She said it again, now.

“I want yo’ baby.”

Lizzie didn’t take the news as well. Expecting an argument, Jass delayed telling her until he had little choice. She stared at him in utter bewilderment.

“Whatever for?”

Jass shrugged. “So I can get my degree.”

“What good is that to you?” Lizzie was on the verge of temper. “Do you intend to enter a profession?”

Jass tried laughter, but it didn’t work. “Don’t be silly,” he said. “It’s just-”

He wondered why it had become so important to him.

“I need to do something, something of my own. I don’t want to ride through my life on my father’s coattails.”

Lizzie had one of those odd moments of clarity that came to her occasionally, when her world was falling apart and she looked in the mirror.

“That’s all very well for you,” she said. “But what about me? Four years

without YOU.”

Jass laughed again. “You’ll be fine. You can go to all your balls and parties and picnics and not have to worry about dragging dull old me along.”

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Lizzie stared at him in amazement. He doesn’t know who he is, she thought, doesn’t appreciate his position. He never has. He needs me.

“I’m not interested in parties,” she said, and let the tears trickle down her cheeks. “I need you.”

Which was the real truth of the matter. Lizzie needed Jass-someone-desperately. And unlike Jass, she didn’t have many choices. She played her ace.

“I think it’s very unfair,” she said. “I had thought your intentions to me were more immediate.”

“Oh, Lizzie, I’m still too young to get married,” Jass lied. Some of his peers had already announced their engagements.

“Married, perhaps, but if you want me to wait for you for four years, I think you should give me some indication that I wouldn’t be wasting my time.”

Jass didn’t know if he wanted her to wait but saw no harm in it. At this moment his future seemed limitlessly happy. Young and rich, strong and mated, sought by a fairly beautiful woman who would make a fine mistress of the manor, soon he would be free of his pressing responsibilities and was looking forward to four years of carelessness. Already he was becoming a carefree freshman at college, and he saw no harm in making a promise to Lizzie that, in four years’ time, he might not necessarily have to keep. Anything could happen in four years, and knowing Lizzie’s low threshold of boredom, he imagined she would eventually find another beau, which prospect didn’t disturb him, although at this moment, about to set off on his great adventure, he felt as close to Lizzie as he ever had. Or perhaps ever would.

Every young man going to college should have a sweetheart waiting for him at home.

He smiled at her, and put his arm around her.

“Hush, now,” he said gently. “Don’t cry. I promise that if you are true to me while I am gone, you will not be wasting your time.”

It sounded pretty good to him, and he believed it at the moment that he said it.

Lizzie believed it too. “Oh, Jass,” she said, and closed her eyes.

Her lips were only inches from his, and Jass knew what she

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wanted, what he should do next, and found himself wanting it too. He kissed her. She yielded to him, but did not open her mouth.

It made Jass angry. She had chided him at Nashville for his chaste, youthful kiss, had told him to learn to do it properly. Well, he had learned. He’d had an extraordinary teacher. For one fierce moment, he pretended it was Easter in his arms, and forced his tongue into Lizzie’s mouth. It was good, because she was so surprised, but it wasn’t great.

There seemed to be limits on how far his tongue could go, certain hard edges. When he kissed Easter, it was completely different, soft and endless, without any sense that there was bone within this flesh, just warm, wet flesh, soft, sweet flesh, forever, without end.

Still, Lizzie was amazed. She had allowed young men to kiss her, and one had poked his tongue, as a sort of dare, quickly between her lips, but she had almost bitten it off and made a considerable fuss. The circumstances were not right to make a fuss with Jass now, nor did she want to, for now he was everything she wanted him to be, her lover and her father and her master.

She was puzzled because she expected to feel some hardness in his groin, pressing against her. All the other girls told her this happened, giggling about the

pleasure it could give, and swooning at the prospect of the pain it was supposed to cause. She certainly felt something pressing against her, but it was soft and squashy, and she quite enjoyed it. She was also considerably relieved. She'd heard that once the beast was unleashed, she would have no power to stop it, and it frightened her, for while Lizzie was interested in the potential pleasure, she was terrified of any possible pain.

She backed her hips away from his, and then broke from the kiss.

"Did I do something wrong?" Jass wondered.

"Oh, no," she said, and had to make him understand. "You do know that I love you, don't you?"

It was important that he did. She could not give herself to him, even at some distant date at least four years away, without love.

Even more importantly, she had to know that she was loved in return. So she asked him.

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"Do you love me?"

"Yes, of course," Jass said.

And because it didn't sound entirely convincing, even to him, he added something else.

"With all my heart."

And wondered why Easter never asked him that question, and knew it was because she had no need to ask.

His family gathered on the veranda to wave goodbye to him, and Cap'n Jack,

although Easter stood in the trees some distance away. He had spent the night with her, but now he had to ignore her, except for a simple wave.

She had not told him she was pregnant.

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Jass did well at college. A serious and capable student, he had no difficulty achieving adequate grades, but since his eventual degree was of little moment to him, and of less value to his station, he studied only as much as was necessary, and spent the rest of his time enjoying the respite that this sojourn away from Alabama allowed him.

The adventure began with the journey. Accompanied by Cap'n Jack, he had traveled through Knoxville and Charleston to Alexandria, so that Jass might visit the nation's capital across the river, and on to Baltimore and Wilmington, before arriving at his destination, the College of New Jersey, situated by a lovely lake, near Princeton Village. Virginia was his first surprise, his first sense of the age and history of his country, the first time he had seen buildings more than fifty years old.

Cap'n Jack was his guide as far as Washington, having been there before with his old Massa, but when they ventured farther north it was virgin territory for both of them.

It was in Washington that Jass saw free blacks for the first time in any numbers, and he was puzzled that the sight was

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not more momentous for him. They were like blacks anywhere, going about their business, ignored for the most part but, it seemed to Jass as they journeyed on, as much reviled and despised as anywhere in the South.

Raised to the concept that all Yankees were nigger lovers, he was astonished at

the way blacks were treated throughout the North. Mostly they seemed to live in enclaves of their own, worked as domestic servants to wealthy whites or as field hands on farms or as unskilled labor in the few factories he saw. Their poverty was dire, and many were beggars, which would not have been tolerated in the South and certainly was not necessary there, and Jass wondered when they would arrive in the Negro haven that the North was supposed to be. He never found it. Intolerance abounded, there were many taverns and inns that Cap'n Jack could not enter, and when they stayed at travelers' hostels or hotels, Cap'n Jack had to sleep in the nigger quarters out back. Just as it was at home.

Even in New Jersey, which Jass had thought to be a true Yankee state, he discovered that there were still slaves. Under pressure from New York and Pennsylvania, New Jersey had reluctantly legislated for abolition at the turn of the century, but significant concessions had been made to slaveholders, which meant that there would be some slavery in the state for several years to come. At college, Cap'n Jack was domiciled in the scarcely adequate quarters provided for the blacks who attended the wealthy students, and Jass was appalled to discover that the Northerners often dealt with their "free" servants far more wretchedly than the Southerners treated their valuable slaves.

"Boston," George Pritchard, his roommate from Delaware, told him. "They love their blacks in Boston. Only there aren't many there to love. It's the bog Irish who are the problem in Boston."

"I'm Irish," Jass laughed in response, and George, a studious young man, looked at him seriously.

"No," said George, "you are a gentleman. The rest of us are in waiting."

It was true. His father's death and his inheritance had given Jass an authority that set him slightly apart from his fellows, who still lived in expectation of their patrimony. Jass had ac-

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cess to his own money, and, generous as ever, he could be counted on for small

loans when other students' finances were tight. Although the day-to-day business of The Forks was handled by Tom Kirkman and Mitchell, Jass was still informed of major decisions that had to be made, and his advice was waited on, and while Jass appreciated the responsibility, from time to time it gave him the feeling that, again in his life, he did not quite fit in. Richer than any of his fraternity, and most of their fathers, he was still a freshman, battling Livy and Xenophon, fogged in by algebra, with Horace and Demosthenes and trigonometry to look forward to. Not yet twenty-one, he wanted the carelessness that his peers enjoyed, and yet a letter written by him could result in fortunes lost or made from the sale or purchase of land, or affect the lives of the many slaves he owned, and he was continually concerned with the price of cotton. He took his duties and responsibilities seriously, and sometimes felt old before his time, and often, oh, he longed to be silly.

But he was also different because he was mature in another area. His relationship with Easter, and the emotional security it provided, took the frivolous edges from him. He missed her, but without any sharp sense of loss because he knew she would be there for him when he returned. He never wrote to her because she couldn't read, but sent occasional bland messages to her in correspondence with his mother.

He wrote to Lizzie, inconsequential letters with formal endearments, and received volumes of gossip pages in response, filled with trivia about Florence, and The Forks, and the extravagances of her mother. And it was a letter from Lizzie that informed him that some slave, the weaving woman, had miscarried, shortly after Jass's departure. The father, Lizzie insisted, was unknown.

Jass stared out at the night, concerned more for Easter than for himself, for he knew how important the child was to her. He neither knew nor cared if Lizzie was aware of the truth, but correctly guessed that she was not.

She made no great issue of the matter; it was two sentences in a page devoted to happenings at The Forks, and she moved immediately to other news. Jass guessed that Cap'n Jack had not known of the pregnancy-at least he had never mentioned it-and decided

not to tell his slave of the miscarriage, but he wrote to his mother, asking her to buy a small present and give it to Easter.

The young men from the Song Club were practicing some little distance away under ivy-covered arches, and the sweet melody lulled Jass, and caused him to think of the power his seed contained, the ability to create life, and the prospect of a child by Easter became dearer to him, perhaps because of the loss.

To compensate for this, he threw himself into student activities, but again, because of his position, the others would often defer to him when decisions had to be made.

He fenced, and rowed on the lake, and joined the Debating Club, where the increasing division between the North and the South was a frequent topic.

More than half his fellow students were from the South-the college had a reputation for providing a classical education to young Southern gentlemen but there were sufficient Northerners, and some of those avowed abolitionists, to provoke lusty arguments. Jass listened attentively to the calls for emancipation, and agreed with many of them, but in his heart he could not reconcile the appalling conditions in which so many blacks lived in the North with the comparatively comfortable conditions that his slaves enjoyed. Someone told him this was an excuse, a way to justify their subjugation, and Jass wondered if this was true, and allowed that it might be. George Pritchard, in particular, both in formal debate and casual conversation, urged Jass to free his slaves, to strike a blow for liberty, to establish the first plantation in the South that paid its labor, but while it was an ideal that Jass had long ago espoused, he would only smile at George, and tell him the time was not yet right.

“The time is now,” George insisted. “For I tell you, old man, you cannot survive with slavery.”

Jass never responded to this, but inside he heard a small voice telling him that they could not survive without slavery.

He wondered why his mind had changed, and knew that he was, to an extent at least, scared of his own position. To try such a bold experiment would bring the wrath of the South on his head, might destroy the plantation that was under his stewardship, might bring about his family’s financial and social destruction, and Jass was not brave enough for that.

And tucked away in a tiny corner of his heart was something else. Jass did not really believe that The Forks of Cypress was “his.” His father had thought that the successful maintenance and expansion of the estate had been lifeblood to James-but Jass felt himself more of a caretaker, looking after something that already existed for the benefit of someone yet to come.

His son.

As the months passed, the idea of having a son, a child, an heir, became increasingly important to Jass, who, often, wanted to be rid of the burden that had come to him. Sometimes he yearned to be with Wesley, out there, in the nowhere, with Easter beside him, living in a simple log cabin along a crystal stream, farming a few manageable acres, and letting the rest of the world do what it would. The rest of the world was too complicated.

This new world was fascinating to Cap’n Jack. He did not enjoy most of the aspects of college life. His privileged position at The Forks was taken from him; here he was just a slave, treated by everyone but Jass as inconsequentially as the other slaves and servants. The bunkhouse in which he slept was cramped and uncomfortable, the food provided was barely adequate, and his companion blacks were either servile, in the case of the slaves, or trouble stirrers in the case of the servants. The nights were spent in endless argument, the servants urging the slaves to rebel, to escape, or fight their bondage, and the slaves begging the servants to leave them be or complaining or making plans to run away, which none of them would ever do.

But, oh, the days! The days of Cap’n Jack were magnificent. Since it was believed that none of the slaves could read or write, they were allowed to squat on the floor at the back of the classrooms in case their masters should have need of them. Thus Cap’n Jack, who could read and write, was introduced to worlds he had never known existed.

Helen launched a thousand ships, and made men immortal with a kiss.

Achilles killed and died for love of Patroclus. Romulus founded Rome and Cleopatra destroyed Antony for love. Charlemagne conquered Europe and Harold invaded

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Britain. Columbus discovered America and Byron found Greece. France deposed a monarch and instituted a terror, while England created an empire and lost America. A multitude of inquiring minds and provocative artists were paraded before him: Homer, Socrates, Plato, Horace, and Cicero; da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Titian; Erasmus, Copernicus, and Galileo.

No one told him of the slaves who populated Greece and Rome and added to their glory. No one told him of the great, lost kingdoms of Africa, except that of Sheba and its queen who beguiled a biblical king.

It was George Pritchard who led the way. "But if Sheba came from Africa," he said to the professor, "was she black?"

The room fell silent. None of the students had ever considered this. The professor had.

"We do not know that the realm of Sheba was actually on the African continent," he said. "More probably, the southern Arabian peninsula—"

George smiled. "Then she was—he trod carefully" swarthy at least?"

Cap'n Jack listened intently.

"Swarthy, yes, undoubtedly swarthy, I think that's an admirable word," the professor agreed.

“Brown, that is?” George pushed his point.

“Well, brown, perhaps light brown, like many Semitic peoples. I can’t see that it matters.” The professor was not happy with the direction.

“No, I don’t suppose it matters at all.” George was all innocence. “It had simply never occurred to me that Solomon loved a mulatta.”

Jass turned slightly pink, and grinned, and there were some sharp hisses of disapproval from other students.

“That’s a very abrupt way of putting it,” the professor said, “but I think there is a lesson here. The beauty of the Bible is that it exposes us to the complete range of human experience. It tells us how to worship, how to live, how to behave, even, in Leviticus, what to eat. It also tells us, very clearly, what we should not do.”

He’d dealt with precocious students before.

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“Solomon may very well, as you so coarsely put it, Mr. Pritchard, have loved a mulatta. It is a not uncommon syndrome even today, in certain iniquitous places. The city of New Orleans, I believe, is awash with it.

But Solomon broke his covenant with God, and fell from grace.”

He looked sternly at his class. “So I urge you young gentlemen to think very carefully before giving way to the lusts of the flesh. Only in Christian marriage with Christian white women will you attain your true potential.”

Suddenly he shouted at them.

“All else is base fornication!” he thundered. It had exactly the effect he knew it would. Some cheered, some tittered, and some blushed.

Except Jass, who was, for an instant, transported back years in time, to

another place, where a wild Tennessee Preacher had accused him of the same thing.

And except Cap'n Jack, who had experienced what he thought was a revelation.

He stayed on the shore that evening while Jass rowed on the take. He stared at the setting sun, and thought of the mulatta Queen of Sheba, who came from Africa, or someplace very close to it, as his people had come from Africa, and he allowed himself to dream, for a moment, that his ancestors might have served as attendants to the queen who had stolen a great king's heart and worshiped in the temple of Solomon. For the first time in his life, he had a sense of personal history.

His mind raced on, entranced by what he had learned, and fascinated by how much more there could be to learn. He had heard the debates about slavery and believed in his heart that it must end one day. What concerned him was what happened then. He shared Jass's fear that his people of the South might be reduced from slavery to live in circumstances similar to so many in the North, and he knew now that the only possible way to avoid this lay in education. He had to be ready, his people had to be ready, for the glory days of freedom that must surely come.

Unknown to anyone else, Cap'n Jack became the most avid student at the college. He squatted at the back of every class, his books on his knee, partly covered by a little rug, listening intently to every word that was said. He soaked up knowledge.

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There was much he didn't understand, Greek was beyond him, but he picked up a few words of Latin and French. This actual book learning was of little importance to him; what mattered was the discussion that the books provoked, and he understood that simple reading, in itself, was not enough. It was where the knowledge took your mind that was paramount.

Because he had no formal basis of learning, it was not, in any sense, a rounded education, but he became a jackdaw of knowledge, piecing together scraps of information until they formed, in his mind at least, a representative whole.

During the breaks, Jass and Cap'n Jack would travel together, to New York once, which frightened both of them a little with its pure, hectic energy, and to Connecticut, where the dazzling colors of fall made both of them gasp in wonder. They went to Delaware and stayed with George's family, where Cap'n Jack was allowed to sleep in the main house, albeit in a little attic room with one of the family's white staff, and was treated as an equal servant. It disturbed Jass, for the Pritchards were a caring family, committed abolitionists, who employed blacks and whites on an equal basis. They did not force their beliefs on Jass, except by example, and the excellent example they set made him feel guilty, for this was the world that Cap'n Jack had envisioned, in the days of Jass's youth, and then Jass had believed it was eventually possible. Since the death of his father, he had come to believe that this utopian ideal was not possible, not in the South at least, perhaps because he thought it might be destructive to what he was supposed to maintain.

To Cap'n Jack it was another revelation. This was the way things should be and could be, the way he had envisioned them without any evidence that they actually existed somewhere, except in that vague, dreaming Up South of freedom that the slaves imagined the North to be. Freedom itself was not enough, he knew that already: Without some basis for advancement, which was contained in that simple word educashun, freedom was only a beginning. But, oh, what a glorious start. Now Cap'n Jack fiercely regretted his rashness in refusing his papers of manumission when James had offered them. He understood he had been motivated by his need for revenge on James, but the vengeance had been foul to him, and what he had lost was precious beyond his dreams.

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He thought that he might ask Jass for his freedom. No one knew what had

happened between the two of them on that fateful day in James's study, except perhaps Sally, but he had refused the offer, and he was sure Sally knew that too. And part of him was wary of raising the matter, because without Easter life was meaningless to him. He could easily tell Jass that the ol' Massa had promised him his freedom, which was true, and Sally would confirm it, but even if Jass accepted it, he would never free Easter-she meant too much to him, and he would be scared of losing her.

And he knew Jass had changed, He knew that the responsibilities of his new role had subverted Jass from the Massa Cap'n Jack had tried to train him to be. It was never spoken between them they seldom spoke of important things anymore-but it was evident in Jass's manner and actions.

And in his relationship with George.

Journeying back from Delaware, in George's company, Cap'n Jack allowed a little of his new knowledge to show, by quoting Shakespeare to them.

George was intrigued, but Jass, to Cap'n Jack's surprise, was angry.

"For God's sake, where did you learn this?"

"In class, with you, Massa," Cap'n Jack replied.

"Don't ever let anyone know. Forget what you have learned," Jass demanded.

"Where's the harm in it?" George asked, as surprised as Cap'n Jack at Jass's reaction.

"There are those in Alabama who would lynch him for it," Jass replied, and inwardly cursed Cap'n Jack for not keeping whatever it was he knew to himself.

They rode in silence for a while, and then George looked at Jass.

"How can you bear to live with such a system?" he said. And Jass exploded.

"Because it is our system," Jass cried. "You know nothing about us; you have never come to us to see how we manage things. You hear some ghastly stories

about wrongs that are done by some to a few slaves, and you indict us all. It isn't like that; it isn't what you think it to be."

He struggled to control his temper, because he liked George.

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"Put your own states in order, find jobs for your own blacks, feed your own niggers first, before you tell us what to do. "

George was proud of his family and the way they lived. "Some of us have, I think," he said, gently.

It marked the beginning of the end of their friendship. They stayed roommates to the end, and were polite to each other, often more than that, but they avoided serious discussion of the division both knew existed between them.

Both graduated well, and said fond goodbyes, and knew they would not see each other again.

The eager youth who had gone to college came back as a man, and the despondent slave who had gone to the North came back as a literate, educated teacher.

Coming home was wonderful. Nothing much seemed to have changed, though a great deal had. Florence was bigger now, although Jass smiled and thought of it as a village compared to the great cities he had seen. The hotel had been destroyed in a fire, and a new and grander one was replacing it. A few folk remembered and waved a greeting as they trotted through the main street. They galloped the final miles home, along a path they had ridden so often, and just as always, Jass brought his horse to a halt when they were in sight of the mansion.

He stared at it for a few moments. The racecourse had fallen into disrepair, since it was no longer used. Jass had no strong interest in racing or breeding, and

Tom had realized good money by the sale of the pedigree stock. Murdoch had gone with Glencoe to Colonel Elliot, and Monkey Jack with them. Otherwise everything was as it always had been, the fields white with cotton, the gangs working. The house stood on the hill, the twenty-one graceful columns sparkling white in the afternoon sun. For all Jass appreciated his years away, for all he had grown and matured, he felt like a boy again, looking at home as he always did on his way back from school, knowing he was safe again, knowing he would be loved.

Cap'n Jack was beside him. Things had not been easy between them for the past year. Knowing of Jass's displeasure, Cap'n Jack had become ever more secretive about his learning, and guarded his tongue in conversations with Jass, in case he should offend.

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Jass had tried to apologize to Cap'n Jack, but only for his anger, not for what he had said. He knew the slave had continued to learn, and disapproved of it strongly, for the danger it represented to the man who had brought him up, and also to himself, as that slave's Massa. Above all, Jass did not want change.

But now it was different; now they were at the end of their long journey.

He turned and smiled at Cap'n Jack.

"Race you," he said. Cap'n Jack was ready.

Both men spurred their horses and galloped home.

Sally was pleased with him. His years away had given him the authority she had hoped for, the time to mature, and there was a bonus too. Jass's liberal ideas

about slavery had been of considerable concern to her. Sally took the simple view. She had always seen slavery as a necessary institution, and while she cared quite deeply for many of her blacks, it was as illiterate, incapable children who needed the firm guidance that the whites could provide. As with a child, or a pet dog, she could not bear the idea of sending them out, free, into a white man's world, for she believed that few of them had the skills to survive in that world, and she had heard the horror stories from the Northern states, magnified and gaudily colored in the Southern retelling, of poverty and destitution.

"Freedom" seemed ridiculous to her, if it brought with it such deprivation. She had no patience with whites who treated their blacks badly, for she believed, as a devout Christian, that it was the responsibility of the strong to protect the weak. She believed, as devoutly, that since blacks could not be sent back to Africa, the institutions of the South, benevolently discharged, were their best alternative. Abolitionist literature was proscribed in the South, but Sally was an educated woman, and she was able to glean, from discussion and discourse with

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travelers, and the few Southern sympathizers to the cause whom she met, and with Cap'n Jack, her dear friend, what the arguments for emancipation were, and thought them sentimental.

She talked a great deal with Cap'n Jack, about the North, about abolition, and wondered if she was simply rationalizing, finding justifications for an abhorrent condition, but had found some simple beliefs in her heart. The basic creed of abolition was that all human beings had the right to be free, but were blacks human beings? She did not regard them as animals, but she did not believe they had souls. They were, in her mind, special creatures who, like Lucifer, had fallen from God's grace and were without the sense of personal discipline that might restore them to His favor. Left to their own devices, they were idle and shiftless, children of the jungle, indulging animal passions and instincts. Without a firm guiding hand, they could easily destroy the order, the industry, the civilization, that Providence had destined good Christian whites to bring to an unruly world.

The economic arguments against slavery seemed to her to be the most ridiculous. Abolitionists, Cap'n Jack told her, believed that the South wanted to maintain slavery because it provided an endless supply of cheap labor.

Sally was astonished. Cheap? Slavery was not cheap, at least not at The Forks of Cypress. Parson Dick was easily worth a thousand dollars, if not more, and a good field hand might be five hundred. Then there was the cost of feeding and housing them, of providing medical care, of tending the young and nursing the old. She did some rough calculations in her head and decided that to run the plantation with paid labor might be more economical than with slaves, certainly as far as the household staff was concerned. But then all those slaves would be free, and would bring chaos where there had been order, and the whites would have abandoned their covenant with God.

She thought she might like to visit the North one day to see for herself.

Certainly, the effect on Jass had been salutary. He no longer talked about the possibility of an eventual move away from slavery but seemed instead to have espoused the status quo. Which was all to the good in Sally's mind. For

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better or worse, they had cast their lot with the South and it had been good to them; they were Southerners, and to question slavery, or any aspect of their glorious civilization, was tantamount to treason from an economic point of view, and heresy from a religious one.

She no longer worried herself unduly about Jass's undiminished fondness for Easter. If he needed an outlet for his passions, for he was a young man in his prime, she was relieved that he had settled on the reliable Easter and had not become a rake, or libertine, indulging himself with any slave woman who was at hand. The relationship was settled and discreet, and while there had been some mild, amused gossip about it "behind the fans" before Jass went away, for it indicated his loss of virginity, now it was no longer of any scandalous value and was seldom if ever referred to, even by the inquisitive chatterbox Becky Perkins.

Indeed, it was Sally herself who had raised the matter with Mrs. Perkins one afternoon when they sat on the veranda taking tea, for she wondered how much Lizzie knew.

“Lizzie is an innocent gel,” Mrs. Perkins replied, fanning herself vigorously and unnecessarily, for her black boy was waving a larger fan over her head, and in any case it was fall, and there was a chill in the air.

“An innocent gel who understands little of the baser desires that men are prey to,” Mrs. Perkins continued, her vowels Anglicized these days in imitation of a visiting English duchess she had met. “And it is better for all concerned that she remain innocent, don’t you think?”

Sally thought so and said so. Mrs. Perkins nodded agreement. “We women understand.”

She paused for a moment, then raised her fan and spoke behind it.

“And so much better,” she whispered, “for their eventual union.”

There it was, in a nutshell. Now, above everything, Sally’s ambition for Jass was to see him married and with children. She would prefer his bride were someone other than Lizzie, but Lizzie seemed to be the only contender. Jass was charming to the many other young ladies who came to call on him in increasing numbers, but he seemed to have no interest in them

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as potential partners. If Sally had not known about Easter, she might have worried that Jass had no libido at all or, horror of horrors, that he might end up like young Antony Beaumont, who had disgraced his family when caught by his father in an abomination with a black field hand. Mr.

Beaumont had taken a whip to his son and left a pistol in the young man’s room, in order for him to do the decent thing, but Antony had behaved like a cad and had run away with the field hand to that Sodom of the south, New Orleans. The breathless gossip about this had made Sally even more grateful for Easter

breathless gossip about this had made Sally even more grateful for Easter.

So there was only Lizzie, but even in her case, Jass showed no real desire to extend their relationship beyond the rather complex friendship they enjoyed.

“There’s plenty of time,” Jass had said, when Sally raised the matter at dinner one evening. “I’ve only been back a few months. “

Neither Sally nor Mrs. Perkins thought there was plenty of time-it had already dragged on quite long enough-and so Sally found herself in the unlikely position of being in alliance with Lizzie’s mother to bring about a union that Sally did not entirely relish.

“Time is getting on,” Mrs. Perkins said, and she was not referring to the day. “Lizzie has many suitors. If Jass is not careful, some other young man will snap her up.”

It wasn’t true. Sally knew that. Lizzie had very few gentleman callers and spent as much time as she could with Jass.

“Snap her up!” Mrs. Perkins said again, snapping her fingers and causing several of her attendant slaves to rush to her, to see what she needed.

Lizzie was riding with Jass, but had she been with her mother she would have agreed, for she was pining for Jass to snap her up. The young man whom she was quite fond of had gone away to college and had come back four years later as the husband of her dreams. Partly this was ‘ because there was no one else, but mostly it was because he was now a very handsome and mature young man who was still gentle and caring but with an edge to him that Lizzie adored. He never forced his opinions on her, or on anyone, but had a sure authority about him, so that if he disagreed with something, or thought

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it wrong or improper, she knew immediately what he felt, and wild horses would

not drag him from that opinion. Lizzie loved this, for it gave her the freedom to do whatever she wanted, and if she stepped over the line, which she seldom did for she was careful with him, he would firmly, if gently, put her in her place. The only thing he could not be drawn on was the possibility of their marriage.

“There’s plenty of time for that,” he said, whenever she raised the subject, which, when he first came back from college, was quite often.

She had pushed him quite hard at first.

“Why, Jass,” she said. “I had thought your intentions toward me to be honorable.”

“Oh, they are,” he told her. “Entirely honorable.”

“Well, surely, you do not expect me to wait for you forever?” Lizzie primped herself a little. “I have so many suitors, and I do not intend to be left on the shelf.”

She certainly did not intend to be left on the shelf, but that was where she was heading, she thought. Most of the other young men she might have wed were married now, and the few who weren’t showed little interest in her except as a jolly friend (for Lizzie, secure in the hope that Jass would eventually ask for her hand, could be very jolly at parties, when the pressure of snaring Jass was off), but she could not understand why Jass didn’t do what she yearned for him to do.

Nor did Jass entirely understand. He wanted to be married and, more important, he wanted to be a father, and if he was going to marry anyone, he guessed it would be Lizzie. In many ways, he thought, his relationship with her paralleled his relationship with Easter. He had grown up with Easter, known her all his life, and the progression from friends to lovers seemed natural to him, without any dividing line, so that somehow they had always been lovers, whether bedding or not, and more important, they had remained tremendous friends. He had not known Lizzie as long, but he had known her as long as he had known any white woman outside his family, and they were friends, even if their friendship was of a different nature from his with Easter. Lizzie made constant demands on him, while Easter made none. He put this down to the differences in their respective stations and personalities, and assumed that one day he would cross a similar line with Lizzie and take her to bed as his wife.

The difference was that he had an urgent desire for Easter and he didn't desire Lizzie.

She is more beautiful than ever, he thought, when he first saw Easter on his return home.

Which she was. Then a girl, now a woman, she had an extraordinary grace and elegance about her, which dazzled Jass.

The girl he had known had been his friend, and when he had taken her, or she had given herself to him, on the night his father died, it had not felt as if he were seducing an acquaintance. He'd had a need, and he went to his friend and she had fulfilled it. Her body had been no secret to him, for he had bathed with her when they were little, and his no secret to her, for there are no secrets between such friends as they. That he had found new depths to their friendship, inside her body, was simply an extension of what they had always had, and what they were always destined to discover. Even the small separation that had existed between them when he had first been dazzled by Lizzie seemed proper, for it had made him appreciate Easter even more. He had no sense of her as "lover," for that had a sense of the temporary to it, and he knew that his love for her was, as with his mother, the most permanent aspect of his universe. She was, to him, home.

This recent separation, of four years, was the great test of this love, and when he had been with her in the weaving house on the first night of his return, he had been a little scared, for he did not know if her feelings to him had changed. And while he could take her as his right, he didn't want that, he wanted it to be as it always had been.

She had been scared of him, too. She had no way of knowing if he had found some other woman while he was away, or if his taste for her had changed, and the loss of her baby had caused a sadness to her soul, which she carried with her as if light had faded from her heart, and made Jass ache to comfort her.

He came into the weaving house and smiled that silly grin, and sat in the rocking chair and puffed on his old cob pipe, and suddenly he wasn't scared of her, or of anything, anymore, for this is how it had always been and always would be and

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if she had changed a little physically, it was only in the way that he knew he had grown. She was still Easter, only more beautiful now, and he wanted her as much as he had ever wanted anything.

They had sat until dawn, talking some times, silent others, neither wanting the security of the moment to end, and then, without speaking, they had undressed and climbed into the rickety cot. He put his arms around her, looked into her eyes, and those eyes told her what she knew he would never, could never, say. She gave her mouth to him and it was as soft and yielding as ever, limitless as ever, and he mounted her and filled her with his seed, and prayed with all his heart that the seed would take hold, and nourish and grow, and give her the priceless gift that both of them so sorely wanted, even as he knew it was not now, this was not the moment, for no matter how deeply he went into her, she still seemed infinite to him, and there was something just beyond his reach, which he longed, with all his heart, from the very core of his soul, to grasp.

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The slaves were staring at the night sky in awe. Some cried out in fear.

Others fell to their knees and prayed.

Tiara began to sing a spiritual, believing that her love of the Lord would save her from the destruction of the world that was so imminent.

Sally stood with the Trio on the veranda and watched in wonder. Sally's rational mind told her there was nothing to worry about, but the superstitious Sally, the religious Sally, was disturbed by this evidence of the majesty of nature. A star shower had fallen on them some years ago, and the river had flooded, devastatingly, soon after. What new catastrophe might this be, an omen for? The Trio whooped and hollered and played on Sally's fears. Polly and Pattie hid downstairs, their

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heads covered by their aprons, weeping. Other house slaves peeped out from windows.

Cap'n Jack was moved in profound ways that related to the knowledge he had acquired at college. He thought this must be how Galileo felt, as he contemplated the heavens. His mind ranged and roamed over centuries of learning, and he felt at one with the classical scholars, as his learning had provoked him to be. He walked with Claudius Ptolemy through the library at Alexandria, imaging the world from God's point of view.

Parson Dick was in his room, gibbering a prayer to a little African totem, eyes wide with terror. He had known it was coming. A few years ago, the stars had fallen from the heavens, thousands of them, scattering over Alabama, but Parson Dick had not been frightened then, for they were only a harbinger of the fateful day that was to come.

It was now.

Jass and Easter stood together in the clearing outside the weaving house, looking at the black heaven.

Some others had joined Tiara in the spiritual, and the lovely choir filled the air around them, counterpointed by the sobs of fear they heard.

A comet blazed through the sky, a bright sliver of light dazzling toward earth.

They had known it was coming, the newspapers had been full of it for days, but no one knew what it presaged. Clergymen thundered the doom it would

bring, the vengeance of a wrathful God upon an iniquitous world. Others believed it heralded the second coming of the Lord. Scientists denigrated all this-it was only an astral phenomenon-but few were inclined to believe them.

They stood in awe of it.

” Some people say it means the end of the world,” Jass said, and moved closer to Easter.

She knew he didn’t believe it, he had told her so, but she knew he was fascinated by the reaction it caused in others, and knew he was entranced by its beauty.

For Easter, it had another meaning.

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“An’ some folk say it is the star that guided the wise men to Bethlehem,” she whispered softly.

Something in her voice made Jass turn to look at her. She looked wonderful in the moonlight, the starlight, her face enthralled, without that mysterious sadness that she had carried with her. He could almost see the comet reflected in her eyes.

“I’s gwine have a baby,” Easter said.

As soon as Jass heard her, he knew that he had known before she told him, for he had known without knowing the night that it had happened, one night not so very long ago, when he knew that he had reached inside her and touched the outer edges of her soul. He felt a vault of exultation that pitched him to some other place, riding on a comet in the sky perhaps, through the celestial heavens.

His silence bothered Easter. “Ain’t you got nuttin’ to say?” she whispered angrily.

How could he tell her of his bursting heart? The only possible way to express his feelings was in simple, teasing domesticity, as if she had just taken in a stray dog.

“Oh, plenty,” he said, and didn’t smile. “Another damn mouth to feed.”

For an instant, Easter was furious with him, the salt sting of tears in her eyes. She had expected so much more of him, and yet this is how he always was in moments of deep emotion. She longed for the words of love he would never say. She turned away.

“They say it hurts like the devil, you know,” she heard him say, and heard the laughter of happiness in his voice. “And you never could stand a lick of pain.”

She knew now that it was all fight. His love was almost tangible to her.

She turned to him, and he had a grin on his face as wide as any cotton field, and his arms were open in the most welcome invitation she had ever received in her life.

She moved to him, into his strong embrace, and he held her against him and hugged her hard, so hard she thought the tiny thing nestled inside must feel the strength of his arms, and his love, and she wanted to cry out with happiness, and let the sweet tears flow.

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Locked in each other’s arms, they were one being, the three of them, oblivious of the night and the world, oblivious of some slaves watching them curiously from nearby, and oblivious even of a comet, glistening in the sky.

if Jass rode a comet when he heard Easter's news, Cap'n Jack was over the moon. He had only learned of Easter's previous pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage when he returned to The Forks of Cypress, and was devastated for his daughter. And for himself, for he was lonely. He had devoted his life to Easter and had lost a great part of her to Jass, and he missed what he had once had. He was furious with Jass for not telling him; he was sure the Massa had known, and if he hadn't known, he wasn't a good Massa.

"She's my chile," he said to Tiara. "He should a tole me. I had a right to know."

"Massas is Massas," Tiara shrugged.

The new pregnancy gave Cap'n Jack a purpose again, in a life that was otherwise empty. New knowledge blazed inside him, but he had no one to share it with. He could not teach any of the other slaves what he now knew, or even tell them of it, for learning was a dangerous thing to them, and they were scared of it. Few things seemed to infuriate a Massa more than knowledge that a slave could read and write. There were some exceptions to this, such as Cap'n Jack, who had acquired his original ability secretly, before he was bought by Massa James, and a very few Massas actually taught their preferred house niggers some basic skills of arithmetic, the better to keep the household accounts, and the alphabet, to make lists. Generally though slaves could expect a whipping if they mouthed words from a book, or had ability with a pencil.

Despite this, Cap'n Jack decided that the new child would have learning, in preparation for that better day that Cap'n

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Jack was sure would come. He no longer believed that he, or his generation, would ever be free; he was not even sure that he wanted it for himself, and Easter was slave to something, and someone, that manumission could never release her from, but the child was different. Cap'n Jack had seen the future at the Pritchard home in Delaware, and he had heard the strident voices of the Northern abolitionists and knew they were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to achieve their purpose. He believed that freedom must come, someday, somehow, though when and how were unfathomable to him.

When it did come, though, he was determined the child would be ready for it.

Sweet Lord, let the chile be free!

Sally was less pleased. That Jass had a slave mistress was one thing. That he would now have a slave child was something else. It happened everywhere; they were called “children of the plantation,” a euphemism for bastards got by their white Massa, and you saw them running around, coffee-colored rep-llicas of their sires, who had no real place in either world. Sometimes paternally shunned and despised or, more often, ignored, sometimes taken in by their white families, they still had no expectation of a future other than slavery. Often they were as despised by the black communities. Slaves and black, they were also something else, something apart, something separate and different. Their parentage was also the source of much malicious gossip behind the fan, and Sally did not want her son to be the butt of scurrilous jokes from idle, illintentioned busybodies, at least not until Jass was married and had heirs.

Essentially, Sally did not want her first grandchild by Jass to be black.

No one had officially told her of Easter’s first pregnancy, but she guessed quickly enough, for she was attuned to the slave grapevine, as far as domestic matters were concerned, and Easter’s condition quickly became apparent. Sally had sighed in relief when Easter miscarried, and found herself praying, and hating herself for doing so, that a similar misadventure would occur again.

If it should not, something else had to happen, but she bided her time until the moment seemed right.

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On a warm spring day, Sally and Jass went to Florence, and spent several hours with Tom Kirkman in his office. They were doing well. Tom had divested them of most of their holdings in other states, at good prices, and the fortune James had left them was intact. She could tell that Jass was relieved and knew

that he had been worried. The relief came from his sense of duty to the estate, and the worry from the fact that now almost everything they owned was invested in cotton. Long ago, Jass had insisted that it was dangerous to be completely reliant on one crop, and he raised that same fear now. Tom handled it beautifully. In many ways, Sally thought, Tom was more like James than ever Jass would be. Yes, the price of cotton was down, but not to a point of any serious concern, and it would rise again. They still owned enormous amounts of land and had considerable sums of money on deposit in several banks. The risk is spread, Tom comforted Jass, when he wondered if banks were safe.

Elizabeth came by at the end of the afternoon, with young Sam and her new boy, John, and Jass happily dandled the little fellow on his knee, while Tom and Sally wrapped up the business matters. Fatherhood is what he needs now, Sally thought, although she was not considering Easter's child as part of that paternity.

They drove home in the open landau, enjoying the pleasant ride. Jass was in exactly the mood that Sally had been waiting for. He had been worried about the meeting with Tom because he fretted about the estate, but had been reassured by the figures he had seen. He had still the smell of infant, the baby boy John, about him, and he seemed abstracted, and talked about John when Sally asked him what he thought of Tom.

Sally let his mind drift for a while and then asked about Lizzie.

"She's fine," he said. "I was with her two days ago."

Having planted the seed, Sally gave it time to take hold, and then moved closer to the heart of it.

"You've known her for a very long time," she said, casually.

"Years," Jass agreed.

"Don't you think it would be fair to her to come to a decision? You can't leave her dangling like this forever."

Jass did not look at his mother. "I know," he said.

-Of course, if you'd rather it was someone else-?" Sally doubted this would be the case. Jass had no interest in any potential bride other than Lizzie.

The landau had turned into the drive of The Forks. Jass stared at the house on the hill, hopefully, Sally thought, imaging Lizzie as mistress of it. She was not exactly thrilled by the idea herself, but mistress there had to be, and if it was to be Lizzie, she would make the best of it. But. it had to happen soon.

"It would be such a pity to lose all this." She waved a hand at the estate as she spoke. "And if anything were to happen to you-

Jass knew she was right, and that he had to take some action, soon.

"Yes, it would," he agreed again. "And Lizzie's the one. It's just-"

"Then what are you waiting for?" Sally saw little point in procrastinating now.

It was a good question. Jass did not know what he was waiting for. He wasn't sure he was waiting for anything. Except, perhaps, some spark of the fire that Easter kindled in him.

"I don't know," he muttered, and found a vague and inadequate response.

"Love, I suppose."

"Love can come later, dear," she said, and took his hand, without looking at him. "Duty must come first."

It was what his father had said to him, years ago, on a warm night when they had drunk port together and first discussed the concept of matrimony for Jass. With Lizzie. Perhaps it is destiny, he thought, with no real enthusiasm for his fate.

He got out of the carriage and helped his mother down.

"You go on in," he told her. "I need some exercise."

Sally kissed him lightly on the cheek, and went into the house. Jass strolled to the edge of the lawn and looked out at the newly planted cotton fields. The sun was setting, and the gangs wending home, the work song drifting to him across the balmy evening. He imagined Lizzie walking beside him, her arm in his, a slave nurse following them, toting a baby wrapped in a shawl. To his surprise, the image came easily,

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and was not disagreeable to him. He turned and saw Easter, some distance away, walking with Tiara.

Easter was full and fat now, and for a moment, and for the first time in his life, the image of her was imperfect. That she was big-bellied with his child was precious to him; he had fussed over her through the early days of her pregnancy, determined she should not miscarry again. As the child had grown and the danger receded, he had worried less but loved the experience more. He had spent hours in the weaving house, sitting close to Easter, his hand on her stomach, a huge grin suffusing his face when he felt the baby move. At night he would lie with her, caressing her fullness, and he had learned how to make love to her with greatest convenience and satisfaction despite her swelling body. He longed to know if it would be a boy or a girl, but as much as he wanted a son, he was realistic enough to appreciate that a girl would present fewer problems.

He wanted a son he could present to the world, while any child of Easter's must be hidden from view. It was this thought, coupled with the image of Easter, that brought home to him, with unshakable clarity, the truth of his situation.

Waddling along with Tiara, Easter looked to be exactly what she was, a slave who could never be more than his paramour. Much as he loved Easter, much as he desired her, even in this condition, as intensely as he ever had, she could never be mistress of his household, she could never walk beside him, arm in arm on the lawn, in the cool of the evening. Nor could she ever give him what he so dearly needed in a child. He might love the baby of the union, with all his heart, but he could never admit that love to anyone, except perhaps Easter. Ultimately, he realized, he could not admit the love to the child, for then the child might

expect more from him than Jass could give.

The proof of his fecundity, in Easter, and the understanding that he had signally failed to do his duty, which was to provide an heir, spurred him in a way that little had done since his father died.

Easter was his to love and cherish for as long as they both should live, and the child was his gift of love. But the days

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of his youth were over; he had sown his wild oats. Duty must be attended to now.

He went into the house and found his mother.

“I thought we might have a dinner next week,” he said, with a briskness that surprised her.

“For the Perkinses.”

Lizzie arrived looking lovely. Since it was too far, and too unsafe, to drive home again at night, they would stay over. They came in the afternoon and were shown to the rooms, and met Sally and Jass later, on the veranda, to take tea.

Becky Perkins was agog with anticipation. A formal invitation from Jass could mean only one thing. She had lectured her daughter for days on her proper behavior, had vetted every item in Lizzie’s wardrobe, had supervised the packing of the chosen garments, and had lost her temper several times every day with each and every one of her slave retinue, which caused them all to shout at each other. And then her dear, longsuffering husband had actually raised his voice to her. She had taken to bed with a sick headache but got up again an hour later because she realized she had not organized her own wardrobe for the occasion.

Mr. Perkins was used to domestic chaos, but his wife’s present hysteria caused

his ulcer to go wild. His adventures in the land trade had leveled off, he had made his fortune and now stood in awe of it, and his abiding obsession at present was the maintenance of that fortune, which, to his consternation, proved far more difficult than the making of it. An ill-timed sale of a few acres, resulting in a small loss, sent his stomach haywire, and he lived in the constant fear that he might completely lose his sense of timing, and with it everything he had acquired. He was not particularly excited about the visit to the Jacksons. While he wanted to see his little girl married, young Jackson had kept her on a string for so long that he hardly believed this invitation signified what his wife insisted it did, and he was concerned at the cost to him of a suitable wedding for Lizzie if she did marry into such a station. On top of all this, he would be away from his study, from his ledgers, for two whole days; the price of land could collapse around him, and he would be unable to salvage anything from the wreck.

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He was so distracted, he shouted at several of his wife's slaves, for the first time, although their very presence infuriated him. The cost of buying them had been a huge outlay, and the cost of maintaining them was the stuff of his nightmares.

"How many damn niggers do you need?" he had yelled at his wife, who had stared at him in astonishment, burst into tears, and gone upstairs to her room.

Throughout it all, Lizzie had been an island of calm in the hurricane of her mother's chaos. The arrival of the invitation had caused her heart to flutter, for she guessed precisely what it implied, and a later note from Sally had effectively confirmed this. Suddenly, all Lizzie's fears and anxieties about being left on the shelf flooded out of her; the years of chase were to yield their prize, and it was a considerable one. She bore her mother's panic with grace and humor, and massaged her father's temper when he despaired of Becky's improvidence. When she was alone in her room, she looked in the mirror for hours at a time, critically examining every fault she could see, ruthlessly demanding much of herself, and sedulously schooling herself not to simmer, for she knew it drove Jass mad.

Still, she was not immune to a sense of excitement, but it was a private one,

detached from her parents'. She lived through the days tingling with joy, and as their carriage drove up the long drive to the house that would soon be hers, Lizzie experienced a sense of hope for a happy life that she had seldom known before.

Upstairs in her room at The Forks, she took great care about her toilette, and came down to the veranda in a demure dress of palest yellow, offset with little bows of apple green. Sally, she could tell, was pleased, and Jass, when he turned to her, seemed to see her with new eyes.

"Why, Lizzie," he said, "you look absolutely lovely." In a sense, he was seeing Lizzie for the first time, at least in her new role. They had not met since he had written the invitation, and his attitude toward her had changed. Whereas before he had looked on her as a friend, to go riding with, to escort to balls when he had no other young lady on his arm (even though it was a friend with whom he had a curiously. intimate relationship), now he had accepted that she was to be his wife

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and his expectations of her had radically changed. She understood these expectations exactly, was determined to fulfill them, and, if first impressions were anything to go by, succeeded with honors.

They decided not to go riding-the day was too warm and Lizzie's dress unsuitable. They took a turn about the lawn instead, and when Lizzie casually slipped her arm through Jass's, for his protection, he chuckled.

It

was exactly the picture that had come to his mind ten days ago, and it seemed right and natural. All that was missing was the slave nurse carrying their infant son. Perhaps she was his destiny, after all.

It was about this time that Easter's waters broke, and she yelled to Cap ;n Jack to fetch Tiara.

Jass looked at Lizzie. "I have something very important to say to you," he began, but didn't finish.

Lizzie was so excited she almost simpered, but took stem control of herself. "Yes," she said breathlessly, looking into his eyes.

"Ask you, I mean," Jass continued. "But I should speak to your father first."

"Oh, poor Papa is so distracted by business affairs." Lizzie was anxious for it to be done. "I'm sure there's no need to bother him. He will be content with whatever I decide."

Jass grinned. They both knew, and each knew that the other knew.

"And your mother?"

"Will surely have an attack of the vapors if you don't ask me soon," Lizzie giggled. Suddenly she found she was enjoying herself. And enjoying Jass's company. And even enjoying being Lizzie, which was a novel experience to her these days.

Jass looked about him. The setting was pretty, but not quite what he wanted. If he was going to do this thing, and he was, then he might as well do it properly.

"Not now," he said. "This evening. Before dinner. In the moonlight. "

Lizzie laughed again, and pretended, and made sure he knew she was pretending, to the vapors, in imitation of her mother.

"Why, sit," she said. "I hope your intentions are entirely honorable. "

Jass was enjoying it as much as she. "Oh, they are," he laughed.

"Entirely honorable."

In a sense it was done already, and they both relaxed and spent a pleasant hour chatting about inconsequentials, for they could not yet, of course, discuss the future.

Then they parted and went upstairs to dress for dinner.

Jass was angry. His bath had not been poured, nor his clothes set out.

He rang for Cap'n Jack, but it was Parson Dick who came to explain and apologize. Cap'n Jack was at the weaving house with Easter, and Oliver, who should have taken over, was sick. Parson Dick had been on his way -up to attend to things himself when Jass rang the bell. Jass climbed into his bath, while Parson Dick laid out his clothes.

"You'll be one slave richer tomorrer, Massa," Parson Dick chuckled. "I'm afraid Missy Easter's yelling fit to bring the roof down. "

He was puzzled by Jass's response. At first there was silence, while Jass soaped himself and assimilated the news.

It was an extraordinary world, he thought, soaping himself luxuriantly.

He was proposing to one woman in an hour or so, while another gave birth to his baby. Easter's timing was, as always, flawless. He started to laugh, and ducked his head under the water.

All Parson Dick heard, in the bedroom, was the laughter, and then a curious

gurgling sound.

Easter screamed in pain. “Lordy, Lordy,” she cried. “I cain’t stand it!”

Tiara was calm, mistress of the weaving house for this little while, a couple of other slave women helping her.

“Yo’ gwine yell a whole lot more afore you’re done,” she said. “It like shittin’ a watermelon. It big and it gotta come out. It’d help if you breathed steady.”

She breathed, long and slow, with Easter, to help her along. “Steady now, steady,” she said.

Cap’n Jack had been barred from their presence, but was outside, peering anxiously in through a window. Would the child never come?

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Jass was waiting on the veranda when Lizzie came to him. The night was still and fragrant with the scent of wisteria. He looked very handsome in his formal evening clothes, and happy, for his sense of humor had stayed with him.

Lizzie had changed into an evening gown of gentle, rustling blue satin, with a simple rope of freshwater pearls around her neck. It was a clever piece of jewelry, for Jass had given her the pearls a few years ago, casually, for they were of no value, as if he didn’t know what else to do with them. They were pretty little things, and Jass was charmed that she wore them now. She stood looking at Jass for a moment, and he at her. If anyone had been watching, they looked to be a perfect couple. And several people were. A couple of guard slaves had stationed themselves under the magnolia tree, to see, at least, and, they hoped, to hear some of the conversation, for all the slaves knew what was going to happen, and someone had to report back to them what the Massa said.

Mrs. Perkins was trying to watch, but was having difficulty finding a suitable

vantage point without appearing too obvious. She'd come into the hall with Lizzie, feeding her daughter instructions as they made their way downstairs, but had stayed at the door, trying to get a glimpse of Jass.

He

was in the wrong position for her to get a good view of him, so she went into the sitting room, and could just see him from that window, but then Sally came in and wanted to talk. She managed to keep a weather eye on the happenings outside for a few seconds, but then Jass and Lizzie walked along the veranda, away from her and out of her sight.

“I guess you know what I’m going to say,” Jass began, after some trivial talk of the weather.

Lizzie saw no need to speak, but smiled, demurely.

“We’ve known each other for so long, you must think I’m an awful slow coach,” Jass continued. “But everyone’s always said we make such a splendid couple, so why don’t we prove them right?”

With exquisite formality and regard for the romance of the situation, he dropped to one knee.

“Will you marry me, Lizzie?” he said.

Lizzie smiled down at him. ” I thought you’d never ask—

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And then something odd happened to her. It was so perfect, and such a relief, and held such tremendous promise of future happiness for Lizzie that she started to cry.

She looked away, to regain her composure. Jass had done everything perfectly, and she wanted to let him know how very much she appreciated him, and what he was offering her. Even his delay of the proposal from the adequate afternoon to the romantic evening was in impeccable taste.

The only thing that puzzled her was the constant screaming she could hear from some distant place on the property, but no one else seemed to be aware of

it. She imagined it was a slave being flogged, but even so she was surprised because she didn't think Jass whipped his female slaves, and certainly it was a woman's pain.

She turned back to Jass, and spoke as seriously as she had ever done in her life until then.

"I'll try to be a good wife, Jass," she said. "And give you fine sons."

He stood up, took her into his arms, and kissed her tenderly. Lizzie gave herself to him, and wanted the moment to last forever, but then there was a discreet cough.

Parson Dick was standing in the main doorway. Of all the listening ears, he had managed to hear the most, and had goodly gossip for Tiara.

"I'm sorry to intrude, sir," he said. "But dinner is served."

Jass laughed. "Thank you, Parson Dick," he said, and offered Lizzie his arm. She laughed, took the proffered arm, and they walked into the house.

And she heard that screaming again, louder than before, and could not imagine what it was, but hoped that she never experienced a pain that would cause her to scream like that.

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"One more push, a big one," Tiara urged.

Easter had lost all sense of place and time. She was lost in a sea of pain and pushing, and coaxing from the women, as the monstrous giant inside her refused to leave its lair.

"It's nearly there," Tiara insisted again. "Push, come on, push!"

Easter pushed with all her might, and felt a slithering between her legs, and

the baby plopped out onto the bed. Tiara snatched it up.

“My lordy, it’s a sweet I’d girl,” she told them all.

Easter sighed, and lay back on the pillow, in relief and exhaustion, glad it was over. She was happier still it was a female baby. Like Jass, she knew a boy child would have had a more difficult life on the plantation.

A

girl could be more easily hidden from view.

The other women tied and cut the cord, and Tiara cleaned the gunk from the baby's mouth and eyes, and smacked her hard on the bottom.

There was a great, indignant cry from the ugly, scrunchedup moppet who had just been bom, but, like Oliver Twist, if she had known what life had in store for her, she might have yelled even louder.

The women washed the baby, and when her skin was clean, they stared at her in consternation, and then at Tiara, who took command. She wrapped the child in swaddling clothes, and gave her to her mother.

"Purty I'il thing," she said. She looked carefully at Easter.

"An' white as cotton," she added, unwillingly.

At that moment, Easter didn't care; she hardly heard what Tiara had said but wanted her baby in her arms, safe, where she was meant to be. The infant sought her mother's breast,

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and snuggled there, content. Easter stared at her, and Tiara's words formed meaning in her mind.

It could not be denied. Although it was still impossible to tell what the eventual color of her skin would be, she was the palest child any of them had ever seen delivered from a slave.

A tiny fear shimmered through Easter's heart, not for herself but for the baby. Life was especially hard for those of light skin. She hugged the baby to her, to protect her from life's storms.

"Mebbe she darken up," Tiara comforted, but neither she nor Easter believed it.

"It don't make no never mind," Easter said, a little defiantly. "She beautiful."

"Ain't she jus'," Tiara smiled.

Outside, Cap'n Jack was doing a little hop of glee. He wanted to tell the world, shout at the moon, that he was a gran'pappy. This was his life now, this was his hope for the future, this would be his reason for living. Most of all, he wanted to tell Jass.

Julie, the cook, had done the family proud. They'd had a soup of crawfish, caught in the dam by Ephraim, and a leg of mutton, attended by two roast capons, with new potatoes and sweet potatoes, fresh string beans and baby carrots, all with a thick, delicious gravy.

The table looked elegant, the room warm and imposing. The men wore formal evening clothes, and the ladies were beautifully gowned, although Mrs.

Perkins was ostentatiously caparisoned with too much opulent jewelry.

Every time Mr. Perkins looked at his wife, he remembered the cost of the gems, and he wondered if Becky would ever stop spending money. He ate little, even though he was not paying for the meal, because of his stomach problems, and because he always ate frugally, as if to counteract the expense of his wife's gargantuan appetite. William and Alexander were away at college in New Jersey, but George still had another year at Reverend Sloss's Academy in Florence, and he had joined them for dinner.

The triumph of the evening was the dessert, which Parson Dick and Polly were serving, an elaborate confection of cake

and pink, strawberry-flavored icing, dotted with cherries preserved in brandy. Jass had opened a bottle of French champagne to drink with it.

“To the happy couple,” Mr. Perkins said, Sally and Mrs. Perkins raised their glasses in the toast. Lizzie smiled, and looked radiant.

“It will be the wedding of the year. Of the decade!” Mrs. Perkins gushed.

“And not a nigra to be seen!”

Sally laughed. Alfred and Gracie’s wedding in Nashville was remembered occasionally, and it still rankled with Becky Perkins.

“Are you still smarting about that?” Sally asked. “It was such fun.”

“It was a disgrace to put blacks in such proximity to white women,” Mrs.

Perkins retorted. “I said no good would come of it. And no good did. Why, wasn’t it one of your slaves, that gel who danced with a white man?”

Jass tried to defend Easter.

“That was all a silly mistake,” he said. “And she didn’t actually dance with him.”

Lizzie had clear memories of the wedding and its attendant parties, but she only vaguely remembered the incident they were talking about, and the fuss it caused. A blurry image came into her mind of Jass leading some nigra out of the bam. She had a funny name, a very Christian one. Christmas? Easter?

Mr. Perkins was inclined to make a speech.

“Nevertheless,” he droned, “we must be constantly on our guard.

Miscegenation will be the downfall of the South.”

Jass looked at him steadily.

“I’ve seen plantation children you would swear were white,” Mr. Perkins

continued. "We all have. How can we know what they really are? And if their blood mixes with ours, we'll all have a touch of the tarbrush soon. Why, in

that cesspool, New Orleans—

Sally thought it was time to change the subject.

"Perhaps we ladies should re-fire-T" she hinted, and Becky Perkins stood in relief. The subject was hardly a fit one to be discussed in front of ladies.

Lizzie was about to rise when a slave came bursting into

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the room unannounced. Lizzie was shocked. Really, discipline in this house was very lax. Something would be done about it when she was in charge. She glanced at Sally, who seemed oddly anxious about the arrival, or perhaps it was just the rudeness of it.

Cap'n Jack was breathless and beaming.

"Scuse me, Massa," he said, '16' comin' in like this, but a slave chile jus' been bom, a sweet I'il girl."

None of the Perkinses could understand the fuss. Slave children were born all the time, and no one rushed into dining rooms to announce it.

None of the Jacksons knew quite what to say, and for a moment there was a thunderous silence. Then George did a terrible thing.

He giggled.

He blushed with embarrassment and stuffed his napkin into his mouth to hide his laughter, and Jass and Sally tried to cover for him.

"That's wonderful news, Cap'n Jack," Jass said. "Give the mother our congratulations," Sally said at the same time.

Cap'n Jack responded to Sally. "I surely will, m'm," he said. "Easter's doin'

jus' fine. I so sorry to disturb you." He left the room.

Mrs. Perkins humphed and sat down. Now she understood. Everyone knew that Easter was Jass's folie d'amour. Well, most people knew. One person in the room didn't know. She looked at Lizzie.

Everyone looked at Lizzie. And Lizzie stared at Jass.

It was not that the truth came to her in a blinding flash. It was as if small pieces of a puzzle, gathered together over the years, slowly began to form and fit with each other, and make a complete picture.

"Easter?" she said, and Jass held her look.

"She does the weaving," he replied, knowing that Lizzie had to know eventually. Lizzie looked at the assembled party, at her mother, who was doing elaborate things with her dessert, and at her father, who was caressing his complaining stomach and staring at the ceiling. She looked at George, who was trying hard to be serious, but she knew that a grin was twitching at the corner of his mouth. At Sally, who was staring

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at her plate. None of them would look her in the eye except Jass. Suddenly Lizzie realized that she was the only one who hadn't known.

She couldn't absorb it, but knew it was true. Easter. The name had flitted around at the edges of her mind over the years, and she could only just put a face to that name, but when she did, the face allied itself to Jass's.

She knew Jass must have been getting "relief," as some women called it, from someone-all men did, apparently-although what he was being relieved of

was not exactly clear to her. Mrs. Perkins had instructed her daughter zealously in all matters of society except those pertaining to cohabitation. The little knowledge that Lizzie did have had been garnered from more sophisticated girlfriends. But she knew enough.

Now it was all crystal clear to her. She stared at Jass in horror, and despised him. What hurt her most was that she had found out now, when only a few seconds ago she had been so very happy.

She felt like an abject fool. She almost fainted, and it was a genuine swoon, not the affectation that she used as a social accoutrement. She clutched the table for Support.

“Suddenly, I do not feel very well,” she said. “The wine the heat-”

She ran from the room. Mrs. Perkins saw all her plans for a brilliant marriage and a secure future for Lizzie fade to nothing. She hurried after her daughter.

“She gets sick headaches,” she told them in unnecessary explanation, and was gone.

Jass and Sally both stood, not knowing quite what to do. George remained sitting, shamefaced.

Mr. Perkins was babbling on about the cost of slaves.

” ... so much cheaper when they are born to the plantation, an endless supply of free labor,” he said. “We should give thanks to God. Although the cost of maintaining my wife’s entourage- “

Sally nodded to Jass, and left the room. Jass sat down, and offered Mr.

Perkins more champagne.

Mr. Perkins declined. “My stomach, y’know. Do you have any port?”

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In the weaving house, the lamp was low. Easter was asleep in the bed, and Cap’n Jack was sitting in Jass’s rocking chair, by the embers of the fire, rocking the tiny baby on his knee, and singing her a soft lullaby.

Sally came in. Cap'n Jack was pleased to see her, although he regretted it was not Jass.

"Here she is, m'm," he whispered. "A little princess."

Sally took the child and held her close. She was incredulous. The babe couldn't be this white. It wasn't possible. What on earth would her life be like?

As the child snuggled into her bosom, Sally's heart was touched by her, and she felt the first stirrings of something she always felt when she held her new grandchildren for the first time, something very close to love.

Lizzie had run to her bedroom and thrown herself on the bed, weeping. She heard her mother come in and sit beside her, but ignored her until the pain was less intense.

"I won't marry him!" she cried, but her words were muffled, her face buried in the pillow. She meant it, though. Lizzie had a very strict morality, and despite a superficial sophistication, a very limited knowledge of the world. Jass was hers; she had no intention of sharing him with another woman, and especially not a nigma.

"I won't, I swear I won't," she cried again.

Mrs. Perkins, who had been waiting for the worst of the storm to pass.

was ready for her.

"Oh, yes, you will," she said. Her tone was gentle and crooning, but there was steel behind it.

"You will have a long engagement," Mrs. Perkins continued. "And in time you will become used to the idea—"

"Never!" Lizzie protested into the pillow.

—and you will be grateful for it!" Mrs. Perkins commanded. She had to make her daughter understand. Perhaps she had been very wrong to shelter Lizzie from

certain facts of life, but she had always assumed her daughter would learn these things from other girls. She'd been so determined that Lizzie would become a "lady" that she had even been unable to tell her about a woman's times of the month, but had her slave housekeeper do it. Lizzie had learned things from her

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peers, but she was so wrapped up in becoming the belle her mother wanted her to be, she paid little attention to it. So the knowledge was piecemeal, like Cap'n Jack's learning, and never formed a consistent whole.

"A woman's lot is not a happy one, and the slave girls are our salvation,"

she told Lizzie. "If it were not for them, we would have to submit to our husbands' brutish desires whenever they felt-healthy-"

It got through to Lizzie. The idea of the monster unleashed appalled her.

But not Jass, surely? He was such a gentleman to her. She had not expected that he would be inexperienced on their wedding night, but she had not thought he would have a permanent mistress, and how could he allow the fact of his infidelity to be thrown in her face tonight, of all nights? It was this sense of hurt to herself that was provoking such bitter disappointment. She had a truly terrible thought. She looked up from the pillow.

"Not Papa, surely?" she said in wonder. Not her dear, sweet, tubby, balding Papa?

Melancholy settled on Mrs. Perkins, and she nodded her head.

"All men are the same," she said. "Lecherous brutes."

"Not Papa?" Lizzie said again, and Mrs. Perkins nodded again.

"If it were not for our slave girls, I don't know what I would do," she said sadly. "Your father is a demon when he's aroused. "

It wasn't true. Mr. Perkins made very few sexual demands on his wife, far too

few in her book, but Lizzie was going through a dangerous crisis, and had to be brought safe to a haven.

“Next summer, you will go to Paris, France, for your trousseau. That will take at least a year.” Mrs. Perkins believed that time was the great healer. “And then you will have to visit all your relations-”

Lizzie stared at the ceiling.

Jass stared at his glass of brandy. Mr. Perkins had retired to bed, and Jass had admonished George, and then laughed with him about the incident, and accepted his brother’s congratu-

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lations. George had a keen sense of the irony of the situation, and had accepted Jass’s invitation to some brandy. George expressed his surprise that Jass was not more worried about Lizzie.

“Oh, she’ll come round,” Jass said casually. “Her mother will talk sense into her.”

“What if she decides she won’t marry you?”

Jass had not seriously considered this possibility. He was sorry that Lizzie had found out the way she had, but at least it was out in the open.

Jass had no intention of ending his relationship with Easter after his marriage, and so the sooner Lizzie got used to the idea, the better.

“She’ll marry me,” Jass told George. “I’m too good a catch for her.”

George raised his eyebrows. Jass was not nonnally so cocky.

“Bit full of yourself, aren’t you, Brother?” he said in surprise.

Jass grinned and winked, and suddenly he was good old Jass again. “Don’t you think I have reason to be? I’m a pappy! “

He jumped on his brother, laughing, and the two of them wrestled together on the floor of the study.

Now Jass was alone, in his father’s study. My study, he corrected himself.

He felt on top of the world, and did something he had never done before.

He

put his legs on the desk and stretched out, relaxing in the comfortable old chair and staring at his glass of brandy.

He wanted for nothing. He was Massa. He was rich and strong and free and mated. He was about to make an excellent marriage, and he was a father, and would father a dozen sons, and his virility would be envied throughout the South.

Sally came in a little later, and found him still stretched out, still staring at his brandy, dreaming of the future, a grin on his face.

Jass guessed where she had been.

“Her life will not be easy,” Sally said. “She looks as white as you or 1.
”

Jass assimilated this, but did not really understand his mother’s concerns.

There were pale nigras everywhere, high yellas,

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mulattas, whatever you called them, and they lived their lives happily or unhappily, according to their circumstances and personalities. He could see no particular problems for his light daughter. She would have an especial place in the slave hierarchy, and live a life of relative comfort, as her mother did. Nor was he disappointed that Easter had given birth to a girl; he was relieved. He thought that he could love a girl-child slave. He doubted he would have the same affection for a nigger boy.

“Does she have a name?” he asked Sally.

“Cap’n Jack calls her Princess.”

Jass nodded, and mouthed the word “Princess” a few times. He knew his

mother was angry, although he wasn't quite sure why, and was determined to provoke her.

He held up his glass. "Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

Sally glared at him, furious with him. He didn't seem to understand the problems he had created, for the child as much as for the family, didn't appreciate the gossip there would be about it, a cotton-white child running around the plantation with only one likely father. Was he so careless of his position? What was it about men? Why could they not control themselves?

"Oh, you men!" she said angrily. "The havoc that you cause. "

She left the room.

Nothing could shake Jass's boundless good humor; indeed, his mother's inexplicable wrath only added to it. She had been stern with him since his father died, all with the best intentions, Jass knew, to help him fit into his new position. But he also felt that she was trying to organize his life, and the idea that he had done something that annoyed her, but something that most Massas did, most men did, was pleasing to him.

Energy filled him. He got up, went to the bookshelves, and took down the leather-bound book that was the Slave Register.

He found a new, clean page, inked his quill pen, and filled in the date of the birth, and the mother's name. Under "Father-If Known" he just put a dash.

The next column was the value of the slave. Jass thought about this.

Properly, he should have written \$50, if the child

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was well and healthy, but he didn't want to make her too valuable, because he didn't want anyone else to appreciate her value.

He wrote \$5 instead.

He had not filled in her name. He scratched with the quill, and mouthed “Princess” again a few times, but he didn’t like it, hadn’t liked it when he first heard it, and it got no better with repetition. If not “Princess,” then what?

He toyed with some other names, but none of them pleased him. Suddenly he had an idea. He laughed aloud, and wrote something down.

All the world was sleeping, apart from a newborn baby, tucked up snugly in the wooden cradle that Cap’n Jack had carved for her.

And Jass, who had crept softly into the weaving house, and was now staring down at his daughter. Already happy, now he thought his cup brimming over. In the dim light he could hardly see the color of her skin, and if there was a paleness about her, it was only natural to him.

She was his daughter. He had made this thing, this tiny, fragile, exquisite thing. He had created it, given it life; it was the seed of his loins.

“Hello, Queen,” he said softly.

He picked her up out of the cradle and sat with her in his chair, rocking her gently. The child seemed content in ‘her father’s arms.

They sat together for an hour or so, and then Queen decided she was hungry and started to whimper. Easter stirred immediately. The crying of the child caused the milk to move down in her breasts. She saw Jass nursing Queen, and for a moment wished that this was how it might always be, but knew it could not. She knew that Lizzie was visiting, and from the chattering slaves, she knew why.

She moved on the bed, so that Jass would realize she was awake. He looked at her, tenderly.

“Was it bad?” he asked her.

Easter shook her head. “Popped out easy.”

“Liar,” Jass grinned. “I could hear you all the way up at the big house.”

It seemed cruel to tell her now, but she had to know, and

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surely, at this moment, she must know that he loved her.

“While I was proposing to Lizzie.”

He hoped for some indication of her feelings, but she gave none. Queen cried again, and Jass tickled her under the chin, to quiet her.

“She hungry,” Easter said.

Jass brought Queen to Easter, put the child in her mother’s arms, and sat on the bed beside them.

“Her name is Queen,” he told Easter.

Easter made no comment, but opened her nightgown and put her breast to Queen’s mouth. She watched the girl sucking contentedly for a moment, and then said to Jass: “You should have a wife. You need a son.”

She had never harbored foolish dreams of any elevation of her status. She knew that she would never be more to Jass than what she was, his slave mistress, while another, white woman ruled in the big house, and she had been slightly surprised at Jass’s constancy to her. Still, she loved him, and wanted as much of him as she could have, and tonight had been special to her. She had not wanted to hear of his proposal to Lizzie tonight, and now she wanted to hurt him in some way. Or if not him, then Lizzie, by default. An extraordinary burst of anger and pride and possession swelled through her. She had something that Lizzie could never have. She glared at Jass.

“But I have the best of you,” she said, fiercely.

She was three years old, and small for her age, a tiny sparrow of a girl, prettily dressed in white muslin, scattering rose petals before her Massa and his bride, Miss Lizzie, as they walked away from the altar. She looked enchanting, and many of the female guests gathered on the lawn at The Forks of Cypress to watch the ceremony wished for a child as demure.

She was shy, and she seldom smiled, but when she did her

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dark-brown eyes danced with happiness. She didn't smile very often because she didn't have a great deal to smile about. Other slave children teased her about her snow-white skin, and she never saw her pappy, who was away somewhere, miles away, and she was told that he would never come back to her. She loved her mammy very much, and her gran'pappy, who was called Cap'n Jack by everyone else. She loved the house in which she lived, a little shack tucked under some trees, away from the quarters where the other slaves lived. Her mammy worked very hard, weaving cloth for all the slaves on the plantation. Her gran'pappy didn't seem to work very much at all, but spent a lot of time with her, teaching her things about the world, and some funny lines on paper that he called the A B C. She liked it when her Massa came to

visit Mammy, because he'd sit her on his knee and tell her funny stories, and a few times he'd given her little presents, and she hugged him and told him she loved him, and would have liked him to visit more often. She wished she could lie in the bed with him, like Mammy did sometimes, and go to sleep in his arms, because she always felt safe and happy when he cuddled her.

She didn't speak to him when she saw him outside the weaving house because he was the Massa and didn't want to be bothered with a little slave girl like her, Mammy said, and told her he would have her whipped if she was a naughty girl, so she kept her distance from him because she didn't want to be beaten.

She would have liked to live in the big house. Her mammy took her to the kitchen of it sometimes, and that one room was bigger than the entire shack she called home. She liked it best there when she saw Miss Sally, who was quite old,

and who always gave her candies or little presents, and told her stories. She didn't like it when there were other white people staying there-visitors, Mammy called them-because then she wasn't allowed to go near the big house, not even if there were little boy and girl visitors.

She wasn't allowed to play with them because they were white and she was a nigra, but she thought she didn't look like a nigra, she looked just like the white children.

Her name was Queen, and she was very proud of it-she thought it made her special-but her gran'pappy always called

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her Princess, which puzzled her. She'd never been to a party before, and this one was very special, her mammy had told her, and she had a very important job to do. She was scared when she saw how many people were there, and they were all very grandly dressed, but her gran'pappy said her dress was the prettiest. She'd rather have worn a dress like Miss Lizzie's, which was all frills and flounces in purest white, and she had a little crown on her head, and a long white train, made of the same material, or nearly, as Queen's dress. She'd seen some of the slaves sewing little glittery things on the train, and out here in the garden those glittery things caught the sun and sparkled, and made Miss Lizzie look just like a princess. She didn't like Miss Lizzie very much-she'd only seen her a few times, and she always looked very stem-but today she was smiling a lot, and Queen thought she must be happy.

Queen was happy that day. As she walked along the red carpet, throwing out her rose petals, she heard lots of fine ladies say oooh and aaah, and laugh, and say how lovely she looked, and some of the men even clapped their hands, and no one had ever done that to her before.

She got to the end of the carpet, and didn't know what to do. She saw Miss Sally standing there, dressed in black, looking very frightening; only she wasn't frightening at all, Queen knew that, and she ran to Miss Sally, and threw her arms about her, and asked her if she'd been a good girl.

“You were a very good girl,” Sally told her. “Everyone loved you.”

Queen laughed. It had been easy really. She waved to her mammy, who was standing with Gran’pappy and some of the other slaves a long way away, watching. She wished her mammy had a nice dress, but she always wore that simple gray linen, and a shawl, and a scarf around her head. She was very beautiful, but you couldn’t always tell, because of that ugly dress.

Queen had to wear ugly clothes most of the time, but she loved pretty dresses, like the one she was wearing now.

Miss Sally took her hand and asked her if she was hungry, because it was time to eat. Queen nodded, because she was very hungry. She’d been really excited that morning, and had been sick and cried a lot, until her mammy told her she wouldn’t be able to go to the wedding if she didn’t stop.

So

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she stopped. and went to the wedding, and now she was hungry.

Miss Sally took her to the long tables set out in the garden, where all the food was. There was another woman with them, Miss Lizzie’s mammy, who wore a lot of fussy clothes and jewels, and always had a couple of young men slaves near her. Her mammy told her this was Miss Becky, and although Queen had seen her lots of times-she came here often with her daughter-she’d never spoken to her. She was a little bit scared of her. Not really truly scared, just a little bit, and sometimes she thought Miss Becky was funny.

When she saw the long tables covered with food she nearly cried again because she’d never seen so much food in all her life, and it all looked wonderful, and she couldn’t decide what she wanted. But Miss Sally fixed a

special plate, just for her, and they all went to sit on garden chairs under the shade trees. Parties, Queen decided, were things she wanted a whole lot more of.

Mrs. Perkins thought it was a wonderful party too. More than anything, she was relieved that it had finally happened. Lizzie had held her to her promise, and it had been a long engagement. The trips to London and Paris had been fun, although Becky hadn't enjoyed Charleston very much, a hoity-toity place, she thought, and no one was very impressed with her fabulous new gowns and her entourage of slaves. "The greeneyed god," she said to Lizzie, but Lizzie had only smiled, and sometimes Becky couldn't resist the feeling that her daughter was laughing at her.

She hadn't enjoyed their visits to their relations in Virginia and North Carolina at all. They'd made such a lot of fuss and bother about her retinue, which was so pretty-how did they expect two traveling women to manage without six nigras? Obviously none of them understood the importance of Lizzie's impending union, though she had told them about it incessantly, and she decided that most of her relatives were hicks at heart. Their touring had taken two years, and Becky was glad to come home to Alabama and plan the wedding in earnest. It took them a year to work out all the details, partly because Lizzie was still a little funny about that weaving gel

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Jass was so fond of, but that seemed to be calming down.

She'd taken charge of every detail of the wedding ceremony and subsequent breakfast herself, and had a devil of a job persuading Mr. Perkins to open up the moneybags to pay for everything she'd ordered. Really, he could be such a tightwad at times, and she never understood why, because they were loaded. She'd expected at least a little moral support from him, but no one, not even William, seemed to appreciate how hard she'd worked to bring this whole thing together. She'd been physically ill the whole of last week and had to drag herself from her sickbed for fittings for the green grosgrain frock she was having made, and even the wretched dressmaker had argued with her, and told her off for putting on weight, and it all got so much she burst into tears, standing there in her bodice and camiknickers, which was very embarrassing.

At last, it was all over. Her work, her life's work perhaps, was done.

Lizzie was formally, officially wed, and was mistress of one of the richer estates in the South. Not quite as rich as it once was, Becky surmised, when old James was alive, but still rich enough. Jass seemed to have very little head for business matters, and left most things to Tom Kirkman, who was dear and hardworking but rather dull, with no great flair about him. And William had been a pig about Lizzie's dowry.

Finally, it had all come together with scarcely a hitch, and when she saw Lizzie walking down the aisle toward Jass, and the minister joined them in indissoluble union, she felt as if a ton weight had been taken from her shoulders, and wept copiously. From sheer relief.

She sat on a chair near Sally and that dear little girl, and tucked into a plate of fried chicken. She was very tired. Her shoulders sagged, she had a splitting headache, and she promised herself a week in bed to recuperate. Sally had been a dear friend throughout it all, and Becky felt she could be herself in her company. Not too much of herself, of course, because so many people were there, and obviously watching them, and envying her. She pulled herself together, and looked about for something to say.

The little girl was eating her food quite daintily. Surprising, for a nigrā child; obviously she'd been brought up well. Not surprising, when you considered who her father was.

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.11 must say, the child has lovely manners," she said to Sally.

Sally was intrigued. Becky seemed to be going flump. She looked old and tired, and some steel seemed to be missing from her spine. Even her vowels were less extended than usual. And it was the first time she had ever mentioned Queen.

"She's a darling," she said, hugging Queen to her. Often, Sally had to stop

herself from becoming too fond of Queen. It would be different, she was sure, when Jass and Lizzie had children.

“She’ll make a splendid companion for any daughters Lizzie might have,”

Mrs. Perkins continued, speaking behind her fan. “It’s such a sensible arrangement, tho’ it’s taken Lizzie awhile to get used to the idea.”

She looked at Lizzie and Jass, who were surrounded by well-wishers. She’s almost human today, Sally thought, as if she were falling apart now that it’s all over, coming back down to earth.

Mrs. Perkins sighed. “I don’t know what I’d do without our nigra girls.

Mr. Perkins—

She snapped her fan shut, pointed it at her meek, tubby husband, who was worrying about business matters with some associates, then opened the fan and spoke behind it again.

—can be a regular demon, you know.” She rolled her eyes a very great deal, to indicate that her husband was a positive Casanova. Sally tried to hide her smile.

The enormous, three-tiered cake was cut, and everyone cheered, and Queen ate three pieces; then she walked hand in hand with Sally as they wandered through the crowd talking to people.

Lizzie had gone to the house to dress for going away, and Mr. Perkins collared Jass for a few words of advice, as was befitting.

“I must say the place is looking splendid, Jass,” he said, a little pompously, Jass thought. “Your father would be proud.”

Jass was in a good humor, and indulged his new father-inlaw.

“We’re doing well, I think,” said Jass politely. “Not as well as we were, but the price of cotton will pick up.”

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Mr. Perkins shook his head doubtfully. He didn't trust anything to do with money.

"Putting something away for a rainy day, I hope?" He mopped his brow with his handkerchief. It was a sultry day. There was a storm coming. "There are a few storm clouds out there. "

Jass knew he didn't mean the weather. He tried to be casual.

"Nothing serious, surely?"

Everything was serious to Mr. Perkins. He'd lost quite a lot of money on a foolish transaction a few weeks ago, and with the cost of the wedding and Lizzie's dowry, he thought his world was collapsing. Although he was still rich, he was not as rich as he had been.

"The abolitionists are getting quite strident," he fretted. "And this new Republican party may take up their cause."

"Well, that's the North." Jass shrugged it aside. "And in any case, the end of slavery wouldn't be the end of the world. "

"It would be the end of the South." Mr. Perkins was shocked by the heresy. "Not if we diversify," Jass said blithely.

Mr. Perkins smiled. He loved winning arguments, and he remembered that Jass used to make a lot of speeches about diversification when he was a young man. Hadn't put one of those ideas into effect, of course.

"I don't see you doing that," he said slyly.

In that instant, Jass could have killed him, because he too remembered his own ideas. And he had tried, but perhaps not hard enough. He often talked to

Tom about planting something other than cotton, but neither of them could think what. Cotton was not as profitable as it had once been, but nothing was more profitable than cotton. And the price would surely rise.

Luckily, Tom and Elizabeth joined them at that moment, with Hugh and Sam, who was an owlish and serious young man. Sam was going to Harvard next week, to study medicine, and had come to congratulate Jass ‘ and say goodbye. Jass knew Sam was going to college, but was surprised. Was he really old enough? Had so many years gone by?

When the time came for Jass and Lizzie to leave, they climbed into the carriage, and all the guests gathered round to

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say goodbye. They cheered and waved and threw confetti and sang songs as the happy couple rode down the drive.

Then a man Queen didn’t know grabbed her and lifted her high in the air.

“My,” he said. “Aren’t you the prettiest little thing.”

He looked at some people he seemed to know, and called out to them, very loudly.

“Whose little girl are you?”

Everyone around Queen suddenly seemed to be very angry, but Queen didn’t think she’d done anything wrong. Miss Sally moved quickly to her and sounded cross.

“You must be very tired, Queen; you need a nap,” she said sharply. Her mammy came rushing up and grabbed her, and her gran’pappy.

“I’ll see to her, Miss Sally,” she said, and carried Queen away. Queen could see that the man who had picked her up was talking to someone else, and then he shouted something out, and he sounded cross too.

“How could I tell?” she heard him say. “She looks white as cotton. How was I supposed to know she’s a nigra?”

Her mammy started walking faster when she heard that, pushing her way through the crowd, and there was a crack of thunder. It frightened Queen, and she began to cry.

It rained for days. The river flooded, and the roads were impassable. Lizzie and Jass had to spend the first few nights of their honeymoon at the hotel in Florence rather than traveling to Charleston to get the ship to Europe.

Usually, the slaves didn’t mind heavy rain. It meant that no work could be done in the fields, and the lenient overseer, Mitchell, gave them the days off. This time it was different.

Mitchell gathered them together inside the barn on the second day of the rain. A young white man was standing beside him.

“You can’t go into the fields today,” Mitchell told them. “So we’ll use the time to fix things up around here.”

He turned to the young man standing beside him.

“An’ this here’s Mr. Henderson,” he told the slaves. “He’s gonna be helpin’ me from now on. You mind him, y’hear? Same as you mind me.”

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The slaves eyed Henderson warily. They were all used to Mitchell, had the measure of him, but they knew he was getting old, and they weren’t sure about this new assistant overseer. They didn’t like change because usually it wasn’t for the better. They stood in the leaky barn until someone told them what to do.

Henderson was anxious to please.

“The barns need work,” he said to Mitchell, who looked at the leaking roof and nodded. His arthritis was bothering him badly, and he was content to leave the day to Henderson, who wouldn’t be able to do too much damage.

“If’n you like,” he said. “Hit ain’t the weather for it.”

He limped away. “Damn rain,” he said, to no one in particular. “Plays merry hell with the harvest.”

Henderson waited till Mitchell was out of the bam; then he turned to the slaves.

“I want a work gang up on the roof to fix the leaks, a dozen men,” he ordered sharply.

The slaves waited. No one wanted to be up on the roof in this weather.

They hesitated a fraction too long, for suddenly Henderson barked a military command at them.

“Jump to it! I ain’t afraid of using the lash!

The slaves groaned inwardly, but shuffled about, trying to look busy.

Clearly there were going to be changes, and none of them for the better.

Mitchell had lingered outside and had heard Henderson use his authority.

He

wasn't too worried about it. All young men were overeager in a new job, and the slaves could stand a little shaking up.

The arthritis in his leg was troubling him badly, and he limped away to somewhere warm and dry. He hoped that Henderson would work out, because then he could retire. Not for a year or two, of course. But soon.

Henderson knew he was on trial, and knew that if he made a good impression, one of the plum jobs in the district was his for the taking.

Youngest of five sons of a dirt-poor tobacco sharecropper, Henderson had been raised to the land and was a good and muscular worker, determined to better himself in life. He had

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no expectations from his father, a drunkard with whom the boy had been constantly at war, and he had upped and left six months ago, with a couple of dollars his mother, old before her time and ailing from a life of unrelenting hardship, had given him. Living by his wits and his strength, which he offered for hire wherever he could find work, he had been searching for a position with potential. He had heard of The Forks of Cypress and its aging overseer, and that there was no white assistant to succeed to the job.

He did his homework well. He found out all he could about Mitchell, discovered the man was considered lenient in his treatment of blacks, spent hours thinking up proper responses to possible questions, and, in speech at least, tempered his own ruthless, lifelong dislike and distrust of niggers.

His timing and responses were perfect. He presented his most reasonable face to Mitchell, who liked the boy and decided to give him a chance.

The roof of the weaving house was leaking, too, seeping in through the cracks, dripping into buckets set out by Easter. She'd complained about it several times to Mitchell, but nothing ever got done. Mitchell forgot a lot of things these days.

She sat at the loom trying to weave, but a persistent drip was making the new cloth damp. It aggravated her, and she was not in a good mood.

Cap'n Jack was sitting on the floor with Queen, holding up some brightly painted cards that he'd made for her.

It was a game that Queen loved. Cap'n Jack held up a C, and Queen knew that, it was for Cat, and D was for Dog. But she always had trouble with the next one-it was a big word.

"Effalump," she tried.

"No, chile, that's 'el-e-phant.'" Cap'n Jack laughed.

"Filling her head with useless nonsense," Easter grumbled, ignored by both of them.

"What's an elly phan?" Queen asked her gran'pappy. Although she already knew, she loved the story.

"A elephant is a great big animal, with a long nose that's called a trunk,"

Cap'n Jack told her. "He live in Africa, where yo' mammy and yo' gran'mammy and me, and all yo' family come from."

"I ain't from Africa, I's from Alabama," Easter grumbled her counterpoint.

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Cap'n Jack ignored her. "Africa is a beautiful country, long, long ways from here, where everybody free and happy," he told the child.

"Is that where my pappy is?" Queen longed to meet her pappy.

Cap'n Jack didn't look at Easter. Queen's paternity was a bone of contention between them. Cap'n Jack thought Queen should know who her real father was, but Easter, ever more practical, forbade it. It would seriously offend the Jackson family and would be of no advantage to Queen. For even though everyone knew it was true, it could not be admitted. She had seen the other slave children taunting Queen about the color of her skin, and to

claim the Massa as her father would make her the object of even greater derision. Children of the plantation were simply that, and she wished her father would forget his silly, and even dangerous, ideas about some eventual equality of whites and blacks.

Aware of Easter's feelings and, in his more realistic moments, forced to agree with them, Cap'n Jack still harbored unrealistic dreams for Queen, much as he had once done for his daughter. He longed to see Queen taken into the big house, as some Massas did with their half-caste offspring, even though the paternity was never admitted. These chosen few children had a better life, Cap'n Jack thought, than those who were relegated to a life with the field hands, and Cap'n Jack prayed it would happen to Queen one day. He hugged her to him.

"No, chile, yo' pappy's a very important man," he whispered in her ear.

"An' if'n yo' learn good an' work hard, one day yo'll live in a fine house with yo' pappy, an' wear pretty dresses, an' be happy, like a Princess."

Easter was furious with him. "You stop that, Cap'n Jack, yo' hear?" Why couldn't he understand it would never be, and that Easter didn't want it to

be? Queen was hers; she made Easter's world whole and complete. She didn't want to lose her, and didn't want to expose her to the less than tender mercies of Lizzie. "She a slave chile, and she allus will be! Jus' like I'll allus be a slave, and yo'll allus be a slave!"

Cap'n Jack ignored her anger. "We gonna be free one day, yo' hear the talk, the day is comin'," he whispered, as much to Queen as to Easter.

The edge of Easter's fury had gone. At least they'd changed the subject.

"We won't be here to see it," she said.

Cap'n Jack didn't argue, for there was no point. But in his heart he believed the day was coming. Every time he heard white folk talking these days, it was about the Yankees, and the North, and abolition. He remembered his own years in the North, and what he had seen and learned there, the good and the bad. He believed that when freedom came, the blacks had to be ready for it. There was no use in having freedom if they didn't have learning, if they couldn't better themselves. He dreamed of that better day for Queen.

Easter was still speaking. "She be better off learnin' weavin', or sewin', or summat useful."

She glared at the rain dripping in.

"Or fixin' roofs."

Cap'n Jack had been promising to fix the roof since last winter. "I'll git roun' to it one day," he said.

Easter laughed. "Chile die of newmonya 'fore that day happen."

She busied herself at the loom. Cap'n Jack rocked Queen on his knee. She was tired, and was drifting to steep. He hummed a gentle lullaby to her, softly, so that Easter would not hear.

"The day will come, chile," he sang. "The day will come. "

The rain was relentless, and Easter took matters into her own hands. Since Jass was not there, she knew the person who would help was Sally, but knew she had to be careful. She was called to the laundry one day, to help iron sheets that had not dried properly in the rain, and Sally was there, sorting through the linen with Pattie and Jessica. Sally never acknowledged Easter's presence in the big house.

Easter began to mumble to herself as she ironed. Slaves often mumbled to themselves, and a good mistress listened to the mumbling, for much could be discovered from it.

“I suppose we could turn these sheets sides to the middle,” Sally said to Pattie, intent on household affairs. “It seems a waste to throw them out.”

She left gaps in her comments so that Easter’s mumbling might take form and meaning.

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“But we seem to have enough pillowcases to get us through the winter. “

“Rotten, no-account, leaky house me an’ the chile lives in,” Sally deciphered Easter.

“I’m certainly not taking another trip to Charleston until spring,” Sally said in counterpoint.

“Roof’s useless, e’vry drop a rain comes in.”

“But we do need some towels.” Sally was listening intently now.

“Po’ Fil Queen could catch her death of cole.” So that was it, and of course, something had to be done, for Queen’s sake. Easter could stop mumbling now, but Sally had to let her know the message had been received. She turned on Pattie and Jessica.

“I’ve never known a household to get through towels the way we do,” she said, as if it was the slave maids’ fault. “This is good sturdy cotton, too. You’d think it would last a little longer. “

Pattie and Jessica, who was young and learning the skills of a chambermaid, started mumbling that it was nothing to do with them, Massa George was to

blame.

Sally spoke to Mitchell, and Mitchell gave the job to Henderson. With a cautious warning.

Henderson was intrigued. He'd heard of Easter, the Massa's whore, and her bastard child, had seen them from a distance, but until now had no reason to go to the weaving house. What he knew of them surprised him. If the Massa wanted some nigra on the side, that was all right by Henderson, although he'd never had a taste for black flesh himself-it revolted him, and he hated to see the high-yella brats they fathered. But this bitch seemed permanent to the Massa; they had an ongoing connection, and he could not understand that, especially when the new mistress was such a gorgeous creature. Henderson would have gladly given his right arm for a woman like Lizzie.

He took a couple of men to the weaving house, threatened a whipping unless they did a good job, and went inside.

How could the Massa bear it, how could any white man? This grubby little shack, and this drably clothed slut. He could smell her from the doorway, at least in his mind, and it dis-

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gusted him. Not that she was ugly; she was quite a piece of woman, and if that's the way your fancy went you could do worse. If that's the way your fancy went. He stared at the child playing on the floor, and his gorge rose. She'd fool anyone. Could be white, sitting there, staring at him with those big, round, scared eyes. But she wasn't white. She was a nigra.

The chaos she'll cause when she's grown, he thought. Some unsuspecting white boy'll do her, and get a bastard, and they'll take over the world one day, and we'll all end up like them. Lazy, shiftless, and good-for-nothing. He thought of his own mother, who'd worked so hard all her life and had nothing, and it infuriated him that this nigger-nigra and her mammy could have pretty much what

murdered him that this pickaninny and her mammy could have pretty much what they wanted, all because the mulatta was good in bed.

The child was scared of him, he could see. And fear, in others of him, had a powerful effect on this young man who had never had dominion over anyone except a few no-account darkies.

“It’ll be fixed by nightfall,” he said to Easter, looking at Queen. “Hope it’ll be to your satisfaction, Miss High and Mighty. “

Easter was unsure of Henderson. “Thank you, Massa,” she said.

He turned to her, and knew that she wasn’t scared of him, and wanted to make her fear him, for it was sweet to him.

“And in future, if you’ve got any complaints, you bring em to me, ” he told her. ” Don’t go running to the big house. “

Easter said nothing. That angered Henderson even more. He walked close to her, so that she might sense his power.

“I know your game,” he said, “You may be the Massa’s fancy woman, but you’re still a slave. And I’m in charge of slaves.”

“Massa Mitchell the overseer,” Easter said calmly. But she was scared, just a little bit; Henderson knew that. He could smell fear. He didn’t have to push too hard.

“He wouldn’t know what time of day it is.” Henderson was not afraid to be honest with her. “Couple of years, he’ll retire, and his job’s for me.

Then things’ll be different round here.”

He didn’t want to push too hard, not yet, and might not

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have under different circumstances. She could go running to the Massa and pour poison in his ear, and if she had enough power, she could even get him sacked. But the Massa was never far at least a week, and by the time he came back

But the Massa was away for at least a year, and by the time he came back, Henderson was determined his position would be unassailable.

“And I’ve got a long memory.” He turned his attention to the sniveling child. “So you keep a civil tongue in your head, and that brat of yours.

Or you’ll be sorry.”

Queen started to cry. It pleased Henderson, who looked at Easter again, and then left.

He thought that Easter would be no trouble to him because he could always scare the child, and the child wouldn’t tell. He felt satisfied with his morning’s work, and yelled some abuse at the niggers on the roof.

Easter ran to Queen, picked her up, and hugged her hard. She sat on the bed with her daughter and hummed a little lullaby.

The world was changing too fast for her. Lizzie, even though absent, was mistress now, and no one could guess what changes she might introduce on her return to The Forks, or how she might affect her new husband’s attitudes and behavior.

And Henderson was right. Mitchell must retire soon, and clearly the slaves could expect a different order when he was gone.

If only Jass were here. Jass would make everything all right.

The honeymoon had begun disastrously. Jass and Lizzie had planned to spend the first night at the Florence Hotel and then make a leisurely journey to Charleston, but the rain made the roads impassable, and they were forced to stay at Florence for four days. It seemed so silly. They should have gone home, but even the road to The Forks had turned into a quagmire,

and anyway, Lizzie showed no particular desire to spend the early days of her marriage under her mother-in-law's eye.

The first evening had been pleasant enough. They had dined in a private room, and the staff had done their best to give the dinner some sense of romantic occasion. Lizzie had retired early, to prepare herself for her wedding night, and Jass had stayed talking with the proprietor, who was a close acquaintance, and had drunk several glasses of port.

Jass felt at peace with most of the world as he climbed the stairs and made his way to their room, but a little part of his brain was worried about what must happen next with Lizzie. The port had not dulled his concerns.

She was in bed when he came in, wearing a pretty nightdress, with the blankets pulled up, demurely, under her chin. Jass had chatted about the weather; then he sat beside her and kissed her gently, and he knew that Lizzie was scared. What was of more concern to him was that he felt no sense of anticipation or arousal. She was not unattractive to him, but it was in a general way, as a pretty friend, lacking that sense of desire and passion he felt when he was close to Easter. After a while he excused himself, went into their sitting room, and changed into his nightclothes.

When he came back to the bedroom, Lizzie had turned down the lamps, and because of the rain there was no moon. Jass felt his way to the bed, lay down beside Lizzie, and she curled into the crook of his arm and chattered nervously about their coming year in Europe. Jass understood that she was trying to delay the inevitable, but it had to happen and he was tired, and the port was making him drowsy.

He kissed her again, and forced his tongue into her mouth. Lizzie did not protest, but she did not relax. He fondled her breasts and lay astride, and she submitted to him, as she had been told to do, and as she knew she must, but she didn't appear to be enjoying herself in any way.

Jass was lost. His only experience of a woman was with Easter, who yielded to him readily, willingly, and with a sense of abandon. He wondered what on

earth he could do to calm the fears of his shivering bride, and what he might do to excite himself, for her fear was unmanning him.

Lizzie was in a turmoil. She wanted Jass, desperately. She

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wanted to prove to him that she would be a good wife, but the prospect of the thing that had to happen was terrifying to her. She had no sense of titillation, for there was an edge of impending violence to his kisses, and the one honest thing her mother had told her about her first time was that it would hurt. When he thrust his tongue into her mouth, Lizzie almost screamed in horror, for she realized that she had no possible route of escape, and when he lay astride her and she felt, for the first time, that hard thing pressing on her abdomen, she almost fainted in fear of it.

Now something odd had happened. The hard monster wasn't hard anymore; it was soft again, and all sense of urgency had deserted Jass. She couldn't believe it was over-it couldn't be this short, this easy, and there had been no pain-but some crisis had passed and Lizzie relaxed and started to enjoy herself.

She loved lying in his arms as he gently caressed her shoulders, and she allowed her own hands to explore his chest, and his biceps, and his neck, and she even let her fingers trace their way to his lips, and he kissed them gently. If it was always going to be like this, then Lizzie wasn't scared anymore; in fact she quite liked it, and found herself liking it more and more as the minutes ticked by, and nothing was going to hurt her now. She felt sensations she had never experienced, of warmth and security, and she felt a curious tingle somewhere in the pit of her stomach, and moistness in that place she didn't like to think about.

It changed again, without any evidence that anything had changed. Jass took her hand and dragged it down to his stomach and put it onto the monster that was hard and hot. It felt enormous to Lizzie and malevolent, for it stopped that warm feeling inside her, stopped the tingling, and brought back all her old fears instead. Suddenly, he seemed to get angry, and moved on top of her and pushed her nightgown up, exposing parts of her that had not been exposed to a man, or to anyone, before. He pushed up his own nightshirt, and she felt the thing, hard and hot and throbbing, pushing against her stomach, trying to find some other

place, and she struggled against it with all her might.

To no avail. Jass had been dreaming of Easter. Now he wanted Easter, wanted her with every fiber of his being, and

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he was intolerant of Lizzie's procrastinations. The more she struggled against him, the more he had to find release, and suddenly he pushed inside her. He met some resistance and pushed again, hard again, and Lizzie cried out in pain, but Jass didn't stop. It had to be, and even though he didn't want to hurt Lizzie, she had to know that he was her husband and her Massa, and his rights were inviolable. To an extent, her resistance to him made him only more determined to prove his authority to her; it excited him, because of that very dominance that was rightfully his.

Lizzie could not believe the pain he caused, could not believe that he would willingly cause her such harm, and she knew that some little part of her had been ruptured and broken. He lay on her now, humping and heaving, while she wept, and even though the pain eventually receded and was replaced by a degree of pleasant feeling, she could not imagine a lifetime of having to submit to this awful thing whenever Jass desired it.

He cried out and, mercifully, stopped moving. Lizzie lay wondering what more could possibly happen to her, and then, to her relief and surprise, he

moved off and lay beside her. He said some sweet things, and drifted to sleep.

Lizzie could not sleep. She lay awake until dawn, reliving every moment of the nightmare in her head, and weeping sometimes, for she felt as if he had made a great, open wound in her body that would never heal.

It got better between them, as everyone had told her it would. It never hurt again as badly as the first time, and sometimes, when Jass was patient with her, and caressed her, Lizzie felt those nice tinglings, and sometimes almost felt as if she would enjoy the act itself, but it never lasted long enough, and Jass was always so aggressive when he was on top of her. What Lizzie never knew, but

so aggressive when he was on top of her. What Lizzie never knew, but sometimes guessed, was that he was always thinking of

Easter.

They were cooped up in their hotel room for four days, and had their first rows, because Lizzie was sure she hadn't pleased him in bed and was determined to make up for it in other ways. She fussed over him too much, and tried to make decisions for him, and he got irritated. Then she got bored with

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the hotel room, and her temper flared, and they had a row about some silly thing. Jass stormed out, and Lizzie cried her distress, and when he came back was ready to beg his forgiveness. But when he came back he had a smile on his face, and apologized to her, as a gentleman should. The rain was easing, the roads were still impassable, but he had found a paddle steamer that was going upriver to Decatur and had booked them on it. The accommodations were fairly primitive, but at least they were on their journey.

They traveled for a year, and both loved Europe, although they never came closer to loving each other. They settled into a pattern that suited both of them, which began on the Atlantic crossing. Alone of the female passengers, Lizzie did not succumb to seasickness and, as the only woman presenting herself at meals in the cramped dining room, took advantage of her situation, and put all of her considerable social skills on display. Jass would watch her at lunch or dinner, a splendid hostess in an unlikely environment, charming them all with her wit and sense of humor.

He was sure they could find a balance in this. She would be mistress of The Forks, impeccably fulfilling all their public duties, efficiently running their private lives. He would make love to her as their situation required, and she would be mother to his children, and probably a good mother too, Jass thought. For the side of him that needed another kind of love, he had his mistress, Easter.

The conditions of their new relationship were never voiced between them, but

Lizzie knew they existed and was not unhappy with them. Jass indulged her every mood and whim; in Paris she shopped until she needed several more cabin trunks to get her new wardrobe home, and he seldom said no to her. He required her presence in his bed two or three times a week, and Lizzie was prepared for it, and found ways to make the experience less arduous. In the better hotels, they would have separate bedrooms, and Lizzie appreciated his generosity, for she knew why it had been done. To show her gratitude, she made sure his life was as full and interesting as was within her ability to arrange, and she indulged the romantic in both of them by taking him to the most romantic places she could find.

It was she who organized the dinner parties, and made them glittering affairs, she who organized his wardrobe and

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his requirements, she who took him for picnics to pretty riverbanks and picturesque villages. She made no more demands on his time than he was prepared to give, and did not complain if he went exploring on his own.

So they arrived at an understanding that made life pleasurable to both of them, that was based on the friendship they had before their marriage, but that now was deeper and more fulfilling because their lives were so inextricably intertwined. Each was essentially happy, and if there were missing elements that might have made that happiness more complete, both thought them a small sacrifice to make for their general sense of contentment.

Sometimes Lizzie longed for children, but her fear of the pain of childbirth was so great she was glad she had not become pregnant.

Sometimes Jass longed for Easter, but she was there, waiting for him, and his absence from her only made his heart fonder of her and, by extension, of Queen.

They were away for fifteen months. It was longer than they had planned, but they were having such a good time they saw no need to return. The estate was in the capable hands of Tom Kirkman, the mansion was Sally's domain, and the price of cotton was high. In London, Jass met enough people who were sympathetic to the Southern cause to persuade him that the South would always

have a formidable ally, and this allayed his concerns about the increasing friction with the North. Lizzie, for her part, was not overly anxious to assume her new role at The Forks, for it meant that she would be displacing Sally, and Lizzie still had certain nervous fears about her mother-in-law.

But eventually they got homesick, and bored with the wandering life, and they came home and were glad of it. They had laid the foundations of an excellent marriage, and were anxious to put their new domestic life into effect.

Lizzie knew he would go to Easter, and she tried to block the idea from her mind, tried not to think about it, and mostly succeeded. There was nothing in the mansion to remind her of Easter's presence. The weaving house was discreetly tucked away, and Jass was discreet about venturing there. From time to time, she would see that little white pickaninny wandering about the plantation, and when she did, it stabbed at her heart,

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for she had not yet provided lass with an heir and had no little baby of her own to love, and she was jealous of Easter, because of Queen. Sally seemed to understand this, and fond as she was of Queen, she would try to see her away from the house, or at least away from Lizzie's sight. Sally also behaved beautifully in the matter of the succession, handing over the reins of running the household to Lizzie without demur, but always there for help and advice.

In truth, Sally was pleased to be relieved of much of her responsibility.

Since James died, Sally had found her role arduous, for it had lost its meaning for her. She had worked hard and capably all her days, and now she was looking forward to a rest. She made a decision that once Lizzie was comfortably settled in, she would travel herself for a while, not to Europe, that was too strenuous for her, but to friends and relatives throughout the South. She also intended to go North for a while, to see for herself what all the fuss was about. And she was pleased with Lizzie, for she seemed to be making Jass happy.

Jass was happy, his life divided into compartments that made one entity.

Always daunted by the myriad details of running the estate, he had Tom and Lizzie, with Sally standing by, to run the house, the plantation, and all the intricacies of their lives, leaving him free to concentrate on the overview. And he had Easter. He had gone to her on the first night of his return, and nothing had changed between them, and now he believed that nothing ever would. He had coped with all the great changes life had thrown at him, and survived, and there wouldn't be any more great changes to cope with. He was free to enjoy life.

The only thing missing was a son, by Lizzie, and he was puzzled that she had shown no signs of pregnancy. He did not connect this to the fact that Easter had never become pregnant again, because he didn't want her to have another child, Because there was Queen, and Queen was enough for him.

He loved her. She had grown while he was away, but was still small for her age, and serious and demure. She seemed to carry the weight of the world around with her and seldom smiled, but when she did it dazzled him and broke his heart. All the pent-up love he had for a child of his own was directed

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toward Queen, and if that love could never be expressed, it did not in any way diminish its value.

She was so pretty, too. He was out for a walk one day and saw her playing ring-around-the-rosy with some other slave children. He hid behind a tree and watched them for a while, delighting in his lovely daughter.

The smile faded from his face as he heard what the other children were singing:

"Queen, Queen, say she white, but she nigger like us!"

Queen was standing in the center of the ring of children, tears in her eyes.

“I am white,” she cried. “Look at me!”

“Queen, Queen,” they chanted. “Ain’t got no pappy, don’t know who he is.”

“He love me,” Queen called at them, in despair. “He ain’t ever gonna let anyone hurt me!”

The more she protested, the more they jeered, until she broke, and stood amongst them weeping her distress.

Jass could not stand it. He moved quickly from behind the tree, and called out to them.

“Get out of here, you little brats!”

The sight of the Massa, angry, scared them, and they ran away. Queen was on her knees, still crying. Jass came close to her, and put an arm around her, told her not to cry, he wouldn’t let anyone hurt her.

“They call me names.” Queen was wretched.

Jass remembered his days at school when they used to call him “nigger lover” and beat him up. He smiled.

“People used to call me names, too, when I was little,” he told her, drying her eyes with his handkerchief. “I wonder why people do that?”

Queen had no illusions. “Coz I different. Coz I look white. Coz I can read.” Jass had no idea of this, and was shocked.

“Don’t ever tell anyone you can read, Queen,” he commanded her gently.

“Some people wouldn’t like it. They might hurt you.”

She looked at him with innocent eyes. “My pappy would stop them,” she said.

“You could stop them.”

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At that moment, he would have stopped the world for her. He longed, with all his heart to take her into his arms, and hold her close to him, and never let anyone hurt her, ever again. He might have done it, for her face was inches from his, trusting him, and he thought they were alone, but salvation arrived, in the form of Cap'n Jack.

"The chile botherin' yo', Massa?" If Cap'n Jack had known what was in Jass's heart, he might have stolen away, and left his granddaughter to her father's love. But he did not know. How could he know?

Jass stood up and told Cap'n Jack to take her to the kitchen and find her some candy. Something in his tone told Cap'n Jack what he could not have known before. Queen ran to her gran pappy's arms.

"She been trouble, Massa?" Cap'n Jack asked.

"No trouble at all," Jass replied.

He knew who was teaching her to read and did not mind. He would have stopped it with any other slave, but his daughter was different. He went to his study, and then to the weaving house, which was empty.

Easter came back with provisions and found Jass hunting through the few drawers and cupboards. She was surprised. He seldom came to her in daylight anymore. He ignored her.

"What you looking for?" she asked, dumping her vegetables on the table.

"Nothing," he said, casually. Then he found Cap'n Jack's homemade alphabet cards, and showed them to her. In that moment, Easter was fearful, even of him.

"What are these?" His voice was even, and Easter looked him in the eye.

Her fear passed.

“Nuttin’,” she said.

Jass grunted, and put the cards back where he had found them. He took a couple of small books from his pocket and put them with the cards.

“What that?” Easter was puzzled.

“Nuttin’,” he said, with a poker face, and a grin twitching at the comers of his mouth. He moved into her arms and kissed her, and they made love in the warm afternoon.

When he had gone, Easter looked at the books he had left.

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She could not read the books, but she understood the pictures. They were children’s books, of fairy stories.

Another book, recently published and not available at The Forks of Cypress, was causing uproar throughout the country. Called Uncle Tom’s Cabin, its presentation of plantation life, and the way whites treated niggers, was causing astonishing and renewed debate in the North about slavery. Those Southerners who had read it had originally dismissed it as a fiction, but the intensity of the Northern passions it had aroused caused fury to replace apathy in the South. Lizzie was terrified of it, not for itself, for she had never read it, but of the storm it had created. The new Republican party had always espoused the cause of abolition, but now one of its younger politicians, Abraham Lincoln, had made a passionate speech in Peoria, denouncing slavery. He appeared to have tremendous support in the North, and there was even talk that eventually the issue would be decided by violence. Certainly all of Lizzie’s male friends claimed they were ready to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend the slaveholding states and their life-style. Lizzie found herself weeping at the slightest provocation these days.

She was pregnant. She was appalled at the prospect of bringing a child into such an unstable world, and she did not understand that much of the emotional tightrope she was walking was because of her condition. She was sick every morning, which she hated, her ankles seemed to be swelling already, although she had months to go, she was getting headaches, and she was dreading the prospect of the pain of giving birth. She came into the dining room one evening, saw that the silverware had not been polished to her liking, and burst into tears again. Sally, who had followed her in, was calm and kindly, and sat her down, and Lizzie couldn't contain herself any longer, and told Sally the awful truth.

Sally didn't laugh. She saw that Lizzie was genuinely scared of what was happening to her body and had not been educated to understand the natural processes. She calmed Lizzie, and told her things that Becky should have told her long ago, and by the time Jass, who had been delayed in Florence, came in, Lizzie had ceased crying but was not in the brightest mood.

"Why's everyone so glum?" He was in a splendid mood

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himself The tension between the North and the South had caused the price of cotton to go sky-high in London.

Knowing he didn't know, Sally tried to cover for Lizzie.

"We've been discussing politics," she said.

"Something ladies shouldn't bother their pretty little heads about," Jass laughed, and rang the bell for soup. He was hungry. To his surprise, both women snapped at him.

"Don't be patronizing, Jass!" Sally barked.

"Of course it bothers us!" Lizzie was all fire. "All this fuss with the Yankees, we could all be murdered in our beds-"

'Parson Dick and Polly came in with the soup.

—like that dreadful business with Nat Turner killing white women and children—”

Jass, surprised at what he had unleashed, tried to calm her. “That was years ago,” he began, but Lizzie was unstoppable.

“And everyone’s saying there could even be a war, and then we’d all be killed and what am I going to do about my poor little baby?”

That stopped everyone, Parson Dick glanced at Polly.

Jass broke the silence. “What baby?”

Now that it was out in the open, Lizzie wondered why she had been afraid to tell him, and felt an enormous sense of triumph. She became impossibly coy.

“A little flower is growing under my heart,” she simpered, and hoped she looked suitably maternal.

Jass was thrilled.

“Oh, Lizzie, that’s wonderful!” He hardly knew how to express his joy.

“Of course, I’m hoping for a boy,” Lizzie said, delighted by his obvious glee.

Jass chuckled happily. “A baby! Thank you, Lizzie.”

She smiled sweetly. “Well, you did have something to do with it, Jass,”

she said, and felt grown-up, for the first time in her life.

The soup was spent with plans of fixing up the nursery, and possible names for boys, and finding a good slave to be nanny, and when the main course was served, Jass decided they needed champagne. Parson Dick offered to fetch it, but Jass loved choosing the right bottle of wine for the right occasion.

The two men went to the cellar together, where Parson Dick offered his congratulations, and Jass had an idea.

They all drank the new baby's health in sparkling wine, and Jass told them of his plan.

"We could bring Queen here to live," he said. "As a companion for him. Or her. They'd grow up as friends and she'd scare away the black bogeyman."

He was surprised at the silence that greeted him. Sally could guess Lizzie's feelings.

"Do you think it's quite wise, Jass?" she said. Jass was a little Put out.

"I think it's an excellent idea, Mother," he retorted.

He did not hear Lizzie's still, small voice saying, "No."

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Queen woke up because she heard voices. They were not loud, but they sounded cross. It surprised her, because she knew it was her mammy and the Massa, and they didn't get angry with each other usually. They were in the only other room, where her gran'pappy used to sleep before she was bom, and she lay in her cot near the loom and tried to work out what was wrong. She hoped the Massa wasn't angry with her mammy, because she didn't want her mammy to be whipped, like Isaac had been the other day by the new white man who had come to work here. As she listened, she began to realize they were talking about her, and she got very scared because she didn't want to be whipped, either. She tried to think of things she'd done wrong, but she didn't think she'd done anything bad recently, and then she realized that her mammy sounded sad as well as cross. She heard Mammy say, "No," quite loudly, but she could not make out what the Massa was saying, so she sneaked out of bed and walked on tippy-toe to their door to listen.

"It's for the best," she heard the Massa say. There was a

little silence, and she knew her mammy was crying, not real tears but crying inside, where it really hurts.

“She all I got,” Mammy said, very softly.

When the Massa spoke again, he sounded kind again.

“She’ll still be yours,” he said, and Queen thought he must have kissed Mammy. “But she’ll live in the big house, that’s the only difference, and be companion to my little boy.”

Queen was puzzled. She liked the idea of living in the big house; they had a lot of parties there, and it wasn’t very far away. But she didn’t know who the Massa’s boy was; he didn’t have a little boy as far as Queen knew. Perhaps that was why he was always so nice to her.

Mammy said something else, which Queen couldn’t hear properly, about Miss Lizzie, and then the Massa sounded angry again.

“Lizzie won’t harm a hair of her head,” Massa said. “I’ll see to that.”

They must mean her, and Mammy must think Miss Lizzie was going to do something nasty to Queen. Queen crept back to her bed. The idea of living in the big house was fun, but not if Miss Lizzie was going to be nasty to her, and even though the weaving house wasn’t very far away, it was far enough. But the Massa would save her, he’d said so.

She snuggled into bed and lay dreaming of parties at the big house, and pretty dresses. Perhaps she might even get to sleep in one of those big beds with a post at each corner and some material over the top like a tent. Mammy had shown her one when they went visiting the big house once, and Queen loved those beds. You could crawl inside, into the nice soft sheets they had there, much softer than the blanket Queen slept under, and you could close the curtains at the sides of the bed, and no one in the world could find you. Then she thought of living away from Mammy, and she got scared again. She wondered if Miss Lizzie would let her see Mammy when she wanted to, and Gran’pappy and Tiara, who was very

old and very kind, and all the people she loved. She didn't like Miss Lizzie, who always seemed cross, and she had seen Miss Lizzie hit one of the slave girls once when the Massa was away. Queen didn't want Miss Lizzie to hit her, and if the Massa was away, and Miss Sally was old and resting, like she sometimes did, what would she do? She wished she could

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close some curtains around her own little bed now, because she didn't want anyone in all the world to find her.

Jass was angry. He couldn't understand why everybody was so against his splendid idea. Lizzie had been pouting ever since dinner, and then Sally had spoken to him quietly when Lizzie had gone upstairs to bed with a headache. Sally was in a quandary. She loved the idea of Queen living with them, but she understood Lizzie's feelings, for to bring Easter's daughter into the house was a considerable slap in the face. Sally tried to present Lizzie's point of view, but the more she argued, the more stubborn Jass became. It wasn't as if the child was to be brought up as one of their own-she would still be a slave-but it would be good for her, good for the new baby, good for all of them to have that dear little creature running round. He didn't tell Sally of his real affection for Queen, nor of his true reason for wanting her in the big house-to protect her from the other slaves. Perhaps he didn't understand those reasons himself. He did understand that he wanted some influence over Queen's education, for even as he rejected his paternity on any official basis, he loved her and wanted her to have the best life he could give her. He and Sally had something of a row, but, as he said, he was the Massa, and his wishes prevailed.

He came to see Easter, to give her the good news, and she was still as against it as Sally and Lizzie. She seemed to feel that she would lose Queen somehow, and he got angry with her. She'd still see the girl every day, and he had thought she would be proud to have her daughter brought up in such comfort and luxury, with such advantages. Part of Easter agreed with him. She knew the child would now be exposed to a life that Easter could never give her, and she wanted that for her daughter, although she had no idea what eventual use it might be to her.

Mostly, she knew she would miss Queen, no matter how often she saw her. She would no longer affect the girl's upbringing, no longer have her to cherish on the cold nights when Jass was not with her, no longer be responsible for the flesh of her flesh. She also dreaded Lizzie's reaction, and what Lizzie might do to Queen. She thought that this was how her own mother must have felt when she learned that she was to

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be sold away from her only child, and she wept for herself, and the mother she Could scarcely remember.

Jass saw the tears, and tried to kiss them away, and put a positive face on the prospects for Queen. In the end, Easter had to agree. She had no choice. He was the Massa.

And he was her love. His comforting caresses changed to intimate endearments, and she gave herself to him, as she always would, and gave him the most dear thing that was hers to give.

She put a brave face on it, and told her daughter the good news, and was surprised by Queen's reaction. It seemed to come as no surprise to the girl. She listened gravely to her mother, and was silent for a little while afterward, and then asked if Miss Lizzie would beat her.

She looked so lost and frightened, and so very tiny at that moment, far too small to be setting off on so great an adventure, that all Easter wanted to do was hold her close and run away somewhere with her, and keep her safe from Miss Lizzie and all the nasty things that might happen to her in life, r-un away even from Jass.

She didn't run away. She couldn't: She had nowhere to go, nor the genuine desire to leave. She held her daughter close and whispered to her that the Massa and Miss Sally wouldn't let anyone hurt her. Queen stared into her eyes, as if looking to see if she was telling the truth, and seemed convinced, and almost smiled. Easter knew that something else was troubling her, and asked what it was.

A tear moistened Queen's eye. "I don't have any nice dresses to wear," she said, miserably.

Easter's heart almost broke, and she spent the next few days making a couple of pretty dresses for Queen, and a smart little pinafore to wear over them, to keep them clean.

Cap'n Jack was all in favor of the idea. To him, it was not similar to the situation with Annie, because Queen would still be with them. What was paramount in his mind was that Queen would now have the advantage of real learning, for undoubtedly she would go to school with Uzzie's children, and she would learn to dance, and how to conduct herself in social situations. She would learn how to become a lady, which was Cap'n Jack's immediate dream for her, and she

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would be raised in her father's household, which, to him, was her true station. Tempered by the reality of a slave's existence, he saw Queen taking her first steps on the path to her true ascendancy, to her true place as her father's daughter.

So it was that on a warm summer day, Easter took Queen to the main entrance of the big house. She knew she should have used the back door, but if her daughter was to be taken in by this family, then it 'would be done properly. Queen was neatly dressed and was wearing her new pinafore. Easter carried a small bag with the girl's other few belongings. She rang the bell.

Still, Easter had a heavy heart, and she wondered what Queen was thinking.

Queen had been excited all morning, and very nervous, but hadn't said very much. As they waited for a response to the bell, Queen seemed to be mulling something over in her mind, and then she looked at her mother.

"Why the Massa come see you all the time?" she asked. Like he was my pappy."

Easter knew that Queen must learn the truth of her parentage one day, that the

other slaves would make sure of it, if they hadn't hinted at it already. Even so, it was difficult territory. For both of them.

"Hush up 'bout yo' pappy, yo' hear, or I take a switch to you," she said, and the words were fiercer than her tone. "Yo' pappy ain't here, an' that's all there is about it!"

Then she relented, for at that moment she didn't want Queen to have a pappy, not even Jass. She wanted her all for herself. She hugged her daughter.

.' Jus' remember yo' got a mammy that love yo'," she said tenderly. But she had to prepare her for the future.

"And a Massa that love yo'. Jus' like he was yo' pappy."

Parson Dick opened the door and was surprised to see them, but understood why Easter had not gone round the back. He almost smiled in sympathy, and led them into the hall, telling them to wait while he fetched the Missy.

They were an odd couple, the two of them, and looked shabby, the half-caste, dowdily dressed woman and her tiny daughter, standing nervously in the grand hall with its chandeliers and sweeping staircase and somber portraits of all the Jackson family. The sheer magnificence frightened Queen and

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brought home the truth of her situation to her. She would never be able to imagine this as her "new home" as Mammy had told her it would be. She'd never be able to run laughing down those stairs, or pad across that polished floor in bare, muddy feet, as she did at her old home. She clutched her mammy's hand tightly. -

Lizzie came down the stairs, almost as nervous as they. She was especially irritated that Easter had used the front door, but had few ways of venting her displeasure, for who knew what the woman would tell Jass, and Jass was so adamant about this whole wretched business that Lizzie was not prepared to

cross him. Nor was she about to lose the confrontation.

“You should have used the back door,” she said sharply.

She stared at her rival, never having studied her before. Easter had always been a vague and shadowy figure to her before she learned the truth of Jass’s affections, and since then Lizzie had scarcely been able to look at her.

Now she did, because she had to, and because she could. She could not imagine what Jass saw in her. The woman had a certain thick-lipped prettiness about her but almost went out of her way to make the worst of herself, in that plain dress and dreadful scarf. “Mammy,” Lizzie thought, “a regular nigra mammy,” and wondered what it was that made her so desirable to her husband. Easter’s disregard of her own beauty was almost painful to Lizzie, who took such care about her appearance, and her careless physical grace made even Lizzie understand something of the processes of physical desire. To save herself, she mentally dismissed Easter as an immoral slut who had some secret, sexual hold over Jass that Lizzie would never understand.

Then there was the child. A scrawny midget of a thing, with no personality, staring at the floor and trying to hide in the folds of her mammy’s dress.

And white as cotton.

“You may go,” Lizzie said to Easter.

Easter didn’t go. She put her arm around Queen.

“I still see her, Missy?” she begged in a plaintive voice that gave Lizzie, for the moment at least, all the power over this woman for which she longed.

“Of course you will. This is another house, not another

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country,” Lizzie said, without any trace of kindness. “But you should know-”

She could not resist. She had to turn the situation to her advantage.

—this is the Massa’s decision. I do not approve of it.” She would show this woman who was Mistress. “But since it is to be, the child will be given every advantage. She will be trained as a lady’s maid, with all the necessary etiquette. So be careful when you see her. I do not want her learning your nigra ways.”

It had a different effect from that which Lizzie intended. The slave seemed to draw comfort from Lizzie’s words. It was the Massa’s decision, about the Massa’s child, and it was Easter who had power over the Massa. Obviously, Lizzie did not want it to happen, but there was nothing she could do to stop it.

” I only wants the best for her,” she said, and Lizzie, to her horror, thought Easter was smiling.

“What you want has nothing to do with it,” she snapped. “We own her!”

She let that sink in for a moment, and was then tired of it all. “Say goodbye to her and go.”

Easter knelt, hugged Queen to her, and whispered in the child’s ear.

” Yo’ be a good girl, like I teached yo’, and do what you tole, allus. Jus’ like yo’ had a new mammy-”

Lizzie turned on her in fury. “I am her Mistress,” she said. “Not her marnmy!”

It frightened Queen, who clung close to Easter.

“Come along, Queen.”

Queen didn’t want to go, she didn’t like Miss Lizzie, but her mammy kissed her, gave her the little bag, and pushed her forward.

‘Queen!’ Lizzie commanded again.

‘Go with her,’ Easter whispered.

Reluctantly, Queen moved forward. Lizzie was already climbing the enormous staircase. Head down, Queen followed her up, her tiny legs only able

to take one step at a time. She looked up a couple of times to see where she was going, and all those grim people in all the pictures on the wall stared

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down at her, ready, Queen was sure, to have her whipped if she did anything wrong.

Once, she looked back. Her mammy was still standing in the hall, and Queen knew she was crying. She wanted with all her heart to run back down and hug her mammy, tell her not to cry, and go home with her to the weaving house, and wake up from this nightmare.

But she had to do what her mammy and the Massa and her gran'pappy and everyone she knew told her she must.

“Queen!” she heard Miss Lizzie shout, angrily.

“Queen,” she heard her mammy whisper.

Queen was determined not to cry.

PART THREE

QUEEN

Not they who soar, but they who plod Their rugged way, unhelped, to God Are
heroes; they who higherfare, And, flying, fan the upper air, Miss all the toil that
hugs the sod. 'Tis they whose backs haveftit the rod, Whose fiet have pressed the
path unshod, May smile upon def~ated care, Not they who soar.

-PAUL LAURFNCE DUNBAR

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d . iQueen!"

She heard William calling her again, but didn't respond, because he'd called several times, and she couldn't decide which bonnet to wear. She had only two, her dark-gray one for best and Sundays, and a blue one for other times. Today was not Sunday, but she was wearing her Sunday best dress and should have worn her gray bonnet, but she wanted to wear her blue one because it looked nicer. It was a little shabby, however, from constant use, and she hemmed and hawed and changed her mind, and her bonnet, a dozen times, while William, who had been ready half an hour earlier, had gone on ahead. Queen knew they were all waiting for her, but today was a big day. They were going to visit Missy Becky at The Sinks, which was a frequent event, and then they were going into town, which was not, and she wanted to look really pretty.

She settled on the blue bonnet, grabbed her gloves and almost empty reticule, and rushed from the room.

William was at the bottom of the stairs.

“I thought you’d never be ready,” he called, as Queen came clattering down the stairs, a pretty sixteen and vibrant with youth.

“Sorry, Massa Bill,” she cried. “I couldn’t decide which bonnet to wear.”

William was never very cross with her, and was laughing. “You’ve only got two, and Papa’s going wild!”

Queen reached the bottom of the stairs and she and William were moving quickly outside when Parson Dick appeared in the hallway.

“Massa William! Miss Queen!” He was always telling them off. A tubby, gray-haired grizzly bear, William called him. “Young ladies and gentlemen do not run.”

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They only laughed, and continued running. Parson Dick was used to being ignored by them, and went to the kitchen. The family would be away for the afternoon, and Missy Sally was having a nap, so he could relax until Massa Henderson came to tea with his new bride.

Jass saw them first.

” There you are at last,” he cried. It was a crisp winter day, and they’d been waiting twenty minutes. Lizzie, pregnant, rugged up and impatient, was in the landau with Mary, William’s younger sister, and Poppy, a slave nurse who was tending the babies, Little Sally, who was five, and Eleanor, who was two.

“Sorry, Papa,” William said happily, to cover for Queen, as they climbed into

the carriage. "I couldn't decide which cap to wear. "

"But you only have one," said Lizzie, who was feeling the cold.

"I know!" William laughed again, smiled sweetly at his mother, and grinned at Queen. Everyone knew he was protecting his slave. He was only eleven, but he adored Queen and always took her side in any argument.

"Well, you both look very splendid, all 'forked up,' " Jass said, anxious to be away. He nodded at Isaac, the coachman, spurred his horse, and led the way down the drive. Isaac flicked the horses, and the carriage followed.

Queen saw her gran'pappy, Cap'n Jack, sitting on a log some distance away, whittling, and waved at him. He didn't do very much except whittle anymore; he was quite old, like Missy Sally, and Massa had told him to take things easy.

Cap'n Jack guessed it was Queen who was waving at him, although his eyesight troubled him-anything a distance away was unclear-and he waved back. He guessed she looked pretty, because she always looked pretty when she went out with all the family, and he watched the carriage until it was a blur to his sight. He sighed, and went back to his whittling, cursing his weak eyes.

He was getting old, he knew. It had been a bitter blow when Jass relieved him of his duties, although it was kindly meant, and replaced him as valet with a younger slave, Alphis. Cap'n Jack knew he had earned some rest, but he didn't want to feel old because he didn't want to die.

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It was his dream that he would see freedom, at least for some of the slaves, if only for Queen, before he died, but that happy day seemed as much a dream as ever. A lot of angry words were being said about the North, he knew, but Southerners had been saying angry words about the North for as long as he could remember, and nothing ever changed. A year ago, ol' white Massa John Brown

had tried to free some slaves and had been hanged for it. The gentlemen of the South, and a lot of the Missys, had been frightened into a frenzy, but after the hanging it had all calmed down again, just like it had with Nat Turner. Now everyone was in a turmoil because of the presidential election, but Cap'n Jack didn't think it made much difference who won, and if it was Linkun, they'd probably hang him too.

He bitterly regretted turning down his own freedom once, and wondered if it would have made a difference to Queen's status if he had responded differently. But Queen had not been born then, and the ol' Massa, James, had said nothing about freedom for Easter.

He spent his days whittling now, or gabbing with some of the older slaves-the young men had little time for him-and avoiding Massa Henderson's eye, and dreaming of foolish, forgotten yesterdays that are an old man's memories.

Queen loved going out, going driving, going to town. It didn't happen very often. They called on Miss Becky every week, but she was very old now, and although she was always pleased to see them, she talked about things they didn't understand, and she didn't seem to mind very much when they left.

William said she was funny in the head because of something that had happened before Gran'pa Perkins died. Once every three months Massa Jass would take them into town shopping, but he didn't like taking the children because he said there were a lot of undesirable people there. Today was a complete surprise. All the grown-ups had been very depressed and very excited all at once for weeks now, because of the election and what the Yankees were doing and saying, and a lot of very important, very angry gentlemen had visited The Forks, and kept talking about war, which frightened Queen. Massa didn't say anything about it all for a long time,

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and then this morning he told them they were going on an outing.

They were thrilled, because they loved these outings. William thought the

excitement of the past few weeks was a lot of fuss and bother about nothing, anyway. He couldn't believe that anyone would go to war because of slaves and freedom it wasn't important enough-and while Queen wanted to believe that there wouldn't be a war, she couldn't think of anything more important than being free.

Except, perhaps, to clarify her relationship with her pappy and the Massa, who might be one and the same person. Everyone else seemed to think they were, and Queen had come to believe it too, but she didn't understand why she was still a slave and a nigger, and he her Massa, if she was white and he was her pappy.

Polly was the first to say it, years ago, soon after she'd come to live in the big house. Polly was fat and middle-aged, and thought she was something much more important than a serving maid. She resented Queen and was always yelling at her for things she'd done wrong. One day, Queen was in the kitchen, where she ate her meals, and a cup had somehow slipped from her hand and broken on the hard stone floor. Polly shouted at her, and told her she didn't care if the Massa was her pappy, she'd spank Queen if she didn't learn to be more careful. Everyone had gone very quiet for a moment, and then Parson Dick told Polly off, and Julie, who was old and fat and always smelled of food, had pulled Queen onto her knee and rocked her and told her not to take any notice of a Miss Flibbertigibbet like Polly.

Queen didn't understand what all the fuss was about, but every so often one of the slaves would make a comment about the Massa and her pappy, and Queen had grown up understanding that in some mysterious way they were one and the same person, and that was why Queen looked white. She asked her mammy about it when she was ten, but Mammy said the same as Julie, that she shouldn't pay no nevermind to such things, and that didn't help very much.

Other things confused her. If the Massa was her pappy, she didn't understand why Miss Lizzie was always stem and cross with her, and she was never cross with William or Mary. She didn't understand why

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she had to eat her meals in the kitchen when the others ate in the big dining room, and she didn't understand why she had to sleep on a hard pallet at the foot

of William's bed, while her brother slept in a big, comfortable four-poster.

Mostly, she didn't understand why she was a slave. Mammy told her it was because she was a nigra and all nigras were slaves, but Queen knew she didn't look like a nigra-she was at least as white as Miss Lizzie or Miss Mary-and she didn't like a lot of the nigras very much. Parson Dick and Julie were nice, and Poppy and Pattie, and even Polly these days, and she liked the coachmen, who were always kind to her. She didn't like the field hands, who were really black, and they said funny things about her, or they ignored her, and so Queen returned the insults, and never went to the slave quarters unless she was sent on an errand, or to see her gran'pappy, Cap'n Jack.

She developed a rationale for her position, which, once she came to an understanding of the mysteries of the body, she passionately believed.

She was a secret child, born of a great love between her pappy and her mammy, who was really a queen of somewhere, in hiding from people who were trying to harm her. Her pappy looked after her, but couldn't admit she was really his daughter because she was the eldest, and then she'd be more important than all his other children, even William. She believed in her heart that one day everything would be all right, and that her Massa would finally embrace her as his true daughter and find her a prince to marry, and she'd live happily ever after at The Forks with her pappy and her marnmy, and Miss Lizzie would be sent to live with the field slaves.

Queen hated Lizzie. Miss Lizzie. Ma'am. It didn't matter what Queen did.

Miss Lizzie would find fault with her, and scold her, or, sometimes, take the switch to her, although she only did that when the Massa was away.

At first, Queen had wanted to run away, back to the weaving house, back to her real mammy, and would cry herself to sleep every night in the little attic room she lived in when she first moved to the big house.

Slowly it got better, or easier to bear. After William was bom, Lizzie had been sick for a long time, and Julie had taken charge of Queen, which was much nicer. When Lizzie

got well, things got worse, and then she got sick again when she had another little baby, Jane, and things got better. Jane died when she was very young, and Miss Lizzie had staved in her room for weeks, but when she came out she was cro~ser with Queen than ever. Things got better again after Mary was bom, and for quite a long time afterward, because Miss Lizzie had been really ill.

When William was about five he moved into his own bedroom, the same one Massa used to sleep in when he was little, and it became Queen's room as well, for she had to look after him. The two grew up together as brother and sister who were not brother and sister, but young Massa and slave. They became good friends, but sometimes William laughed at Queen, and reminded her that she was a slave, and sometimes he said unkind things, especially about nigras, which hurt Queen, even when she agreed with him. Next year Queen was to move out of William's room, because he was growing up, and look after Mary. Mary was nice, but always poorly, and Miss Lizzie's favorite. Queen knew she would miss William.

She saw her mammy sometimes, walking around the plantation, but she wasn't allowed to speak to her then. In the early days, when she first moved to the big house, Queen thought her mammy walked by on purpose, just to see her, and she ran to her once, and hugged her and cried, but Miss Lizzie had been really angry and Mammy hadn't walked by as often. Once a week, on Saturday afternoons, she was sent to visit her mammy for a few hours, and Queen loved those visits. They'd sit and talk for hours, and Easter wanted to know everything that was happening at the big house, and how Queen was being treated. Queen used to tell her of the times when Miss Lizzie was nasty to her, and begged Mammy to tell the Massa when he came to visit, so that he would stop Miss Lizzie, but Marnmy said she had to put up with it because of the other advantages she was getting. Still, it did seem to Queen that Miss Lizzie had been a little bit less cross after that, and she was sure someone had said something to somebody, and that someone was her mammy and that somebody was her pappy, the Massa.

Queen adored Jass. He was always kind to her, and gave her little presents at Christmas and on her birthday. She loved

him so much she called him her pappy once, but Miss Lizzie had been really angry then and had insisted that Parson Dick cane her on her bare bottom.

Parson Dick didn't want to do it, Queen knew that, but he was a slave like Queen, and had to do what he was told. He caned her hard and told her never to say it again, and Queen was a good girl and did what she was told, and never called her Massa her pappy again.

She attended the dancing classes and music lessons that the tutors who came to The Forks gave William and, later, Mary. She learned to sew and to set and wait at table, and Julie taught her to cook. She wasn't allowed to take real school lessons, because she wasn't allowed to learn to read and write, but that didn't matter because Cap'n Jack taught her those things, although he made her swear on a Bible she would never tell anyone, but she knew Massa knew because he gave her a book for her birthday once. She became supremely skilled at selfprotection, she seldom said the wrong thing to anyone anymore, she bit her tongue when Miss Lizzie was sharp with her, she ignored the other slaves when they made fun of her, and she learned to put on one face for Lizzie and another for Missy Sally, who always treated her nicely. She didn't inquire too much about the outside world because the world she lived in was complicated enough, and because she had no ambition to live anywhere else but at The Forks of Cypress with her true pappy and her real mammy.

She loved going out though, if only to escape for a while from her sometimes suffocating circumstances, and town was a real adventure. But first they had to visit Miss Becky.

The Sinks was a pretty house, in a glade about three miles from The Forks. The Massa had built it about five years ago, when Massa Perkins died. Miss Becky had made a lot of fuss about it, and was furious when Massa told her the name of the house, because she said it was very unromantic. She preferred to call it "Chez Pocahontas," which Queen and William thought was funny. They giggled about the name now, as the carriage pulled into the drive, until Lizzie told them off sharply, and told Queen to remember her place.

Tragic circumstances had attended the Perkinses a few years ago. Convinced that his fortune was being frittered away by

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his wife's extravagances, William Perkins had plunged, once again, into land speculation, this time with disastrous results. If he had consulted wiser, more cautious minds, catastrophe might have been avoided, but he was convinced he was a better businessman than any of his associates, and especially Tom Kirkman, who had been his original adviser. After all, Tom had not been doing all that well recently. The Jackson fortune was still considerable, but no one could deny that it had not thriven under Tom's stewardship. He had ignored all his father-in-law's precepts, divested them of much of their land and invested everything in cotton and the banks. Which was fine, thought William, when the price of cotton was high, but cotton was a commodity subject to market forces, and banks frequently failed.

Willing prey to his fears and unscrupulous developers, William invested far too much money in new territories in the West, and bought thousands of acres in California, sight unseen. When this land proved to be unusable, unsellable desert, the Perkins fortune collapsed, and William with it. He panicked, and sold everything he had at giveaway prices. He also sold his wife's slaves. Becky was away in Atlanta attending some function, and, knowing he didn't have much time, he called the auctioneer in one morning, and by evening all the slaves but three were gone: the cook, the housekeeper, and the gardener.

Becky was speechless with rage when she found out, and wept for her darling darkies, and for herself. How could she live? How could she visit anyone of quality now, bereft of attendants? How could she hold her head up in public? She took to her room with a sick headache, and swore she would never speak to her husband again. She never did. The money resulting from the sale of the slaves was a useless, tiny flame quickly extinguished in the ocean of William's disasters. Blinded by panic, he could see no alternative but bankruptcy, and died of a bleeding ulcer the day after Becky withdrew to her bedroom.

All this affected Becky's mind. Increasingly unstable since Lizzie's marriage, she dwelt near the border of the insane, but the loss of money, slaves, position,

and husband in such quick succession persuaded her to cross the dividing line and take

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up residence in the comforting country of the deranged. Lizzie was distraught, but Jass had been good to Becky, and built her a house so that she might be in close proximity to her daughter, and had given Becky a couple of slaves to look after her. She spent her days in a sweetly remembered but illogically recalled past. Above everything, she realized how very much she had always adored her husband, and her loveliest memories were of William, who was waiting for her patiently, in another house he was building somewhere not far away, and of her former slaves, who were mysteriously visiting her husband, and would come for her one day, carriage ready, to take her to him. In her more lucid moments, she understood that William was dead, and she saw no reason for living, but Fate was cruel to her, and would not remove her from her vale of grief.

She loved her daughter, but Lizzie had her own life as mistress of a great mansion, and The Sinks was not Becky's idea of the house that suited the woman she had once been. She loved Jass, but he did not provide her with enough slaves to regain her foothold in society. She loved her grandson, young William, who had been named in honor of her late husband, but he was not the William she wanted. She loved her other grandchildren; the little ones were just gorgeous and she wanted to run and tell her William all about them, but he was never there. She wished they wouldn't bring that half-caste girl with them all the time. She reminded Becky of things she would rather forget, but young William was very fond of her and it was proper that he have a personal slave, although it was high time the girl moved out of his room. If only she weren't so very white. Queen, as the mostly white nigra slave child of her son-in-law, perplexed Becky. Indeed, the whole issue of black and white, slave and free, was confusing to her, as was much of the rest of the modern world, and she no longer collected gossip or trivia or scandal, because without William she had no one to tell it to, and without darkies she could not go visiting. Everything she had ever been was what people perceived her to be, and she could not bear to be thought of as a lonely widow, eking out a solitary existence on someone else's charity.

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She greeted them now, pleased to see them but frantically worried about events in the world, and filled with questions. The few visitors who still came to see her-Sally, and the minister's wife, and some others who, distressed by her present circumstances, had forgiven her past affectations-had kept her informed of the developing crisis between North and South, and Becky was agog to know the outcome of the presidential election. Jass had little positive news for her. The results had not reached them yet, which was why he was going into town, but the general feeling was that Abraham Lincoln would win on a platform dedicated to limiting the extension and expansion of the slaveholding states, and that if he did, South Carolina would almost certainly secede from the Union. It had threatened it before, effectively done it before, thirty years ago, and over the last couple of years the Southern dealings with Washington had been increasingly, dangerously, fractious.

Becky said nothing, but held Little Sally to her, and tears dribbled from her eyes. Any fool could tell that this Lincoln was an abolitionist at heart, however cunningly disguised. The slaves believed it, they talked of nothing else, and Becky trusted their gossip. Thus a Republican victory would put an abolitionist in the White House, with inconceivable consequences for the South, but it hardly seemed to bother her family. They took tea, and chatted about inconsequential things, without seeming to understand that they were standing on the very brink of a precipice. When they said their goodbyes, Becky begged Jass to send news of the election as soon as he knew the outcome, and he promised that he would.

Jass kept his word, but tardily. He did not send old Ephraim to tell Becky the result until the next day, and by then it was too late.

Nathan, one of Jass's slaves who attended Becky, heard the news from Joshua, the gardener, who heard it from some men who had been rafting downriver. Nathan told Mary, the cook, who told Becky.

"Massa Linkun Presyden'," she said.

Becky said nothing, but puzzled as always about the phenomenon that was the slave grapevine. How had news of his

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victory, for Becky had no doubt that it was true, reached them before it reached her? Unable to read or write, or at least forbidden to, what could they know of Abraham Lincoln, how did they have news of him, and how had he become their hero? Becky didn't know very much about him herself, but what she did know frightened her.

"Us gwine be free," Mary said, as a statement of fact, without any excitement or rancor.

Becky finished her supper in silence, and went to her room. She spent a long time preparing for bed, tying her hair in cotton curlers and putting on her best nightgown. She tried to avoid thinking about the future, although the future as envisioned by Mary kept impinging on her mind.

She was troubled by the nightmare of John Brown. Denmark Vesey had been one thing, and Nat Turner another they were nigras-but a white man freeing slaves! Killing white folk! Becky could not imagine what the world was coming to. Or rather, she could, for she knew that the election of Lincoln almost certainly presaged a war between the states no one had talked about anything else for weeks-and while she believed passionately that the dear Southern boys would fight to the very last drop of their blood, and would whip those Yankee cuts in a matter of weeks, she dreaded the possibility of their failure. If the South lost, the ramifications were too appalling to consider, for how could they live without slaves?

What would happen to her, and to Lizzie, and to all of Lizzie's dear children, who would never know the fabulous society that was their birthright? She had an awful vision of Lizzie trying to run The Forks of Cypress without any slaves, and the very idea of it made her weep in horror.

Free nigras! It wasn't fair to them, they were children, the house ones, who

needed a firm, guiding white hand. And the field hands, the bucks, would be running around raping and pillaging at will; no woman would be safe in her bed. It was all very well for the Yankees to claim the blacks were equal, but they were not, any fool knew that, the Bible said so, and in any case, there were not so many blacks in the North for the Yankees to be scared of. Thinking about a violent, impoverished South gave her a sick headache, and she climbed into bed, determined not to leave that bed until she felt better. She

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picked up her Bible and it fell open at Revelation. It was an omen to Becky.

The last days were upon them.

Rather than contemplate the abysmal future or think of her impoverished present, she let her mind frolic through the groves of her favorite realm, the past. She dreamed that her retinue attended her still, as they did in her glory days, when she was young, when the world was her oyster and she its most precious pearl, and when William was there, to shield her and provide for her and protect her.

She called out his name, and a miracle happened! A man came in the door, although it was locked, she was sure-she always locked it in case the darkies should forget themselves and come bursting in to ravish her, or some white abolitionists to murder her. For a moment she was convinced it was an avenging John Brown, come to destroy her, sword in one hand, Bible in the other, and her heart skipped a beat. And another. And another. And as her heart went haywire, she realized it was William; she could see him clearly, and the door was open, and there was light in the hallway beyond.

He stood by the bed and smiled at her, and she felt a flooding sense of relief. He had come back to her, as she had always known he would, and now she could pour out her heart to him, and tell him of her many problems, and he would make it all fight again, and she could hold her head up high.

Now was not the time to talk, she knew that. He held out his hand to her, and

to her surprise, her sick headache had completely disappeared. She felt better than she had done for years. She knew he wanted to take her to show her the lovely new mansion he had been building for her, so she took his hand. He helped her out of bed, and they walked together toward the door, toward the light, which was getting stronger and stronger and held no fears for her, even though she was improperly dressed for daylight, and her hair was a mess.

But this was a welcoming light which told her that nothing mattered anymore. She knew with absolute conviction that when she walked with William into that dazzling light, she would, at last, be happy.

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With defiant shouts of bravado, the South had lived in expectation of the possibility of the election of a Republican president for months. It would surely lead to secession by at least some of the states, and no one could chart those unpredictable, stormy waters. Jass had tried to shield his wife and children from the rumors and the passions kindled, but today was a momentous day, perhaps a historic one, and he felt they should have some understanding of the forces at work, for their lives might never be the same again.

They said their farewells to Becky at The Sinks, and headed for Florence.

William and Mary were chattering excitedly, in a party mood, for visits to town were rare, and even Queen, usually so shy in front of Lizzie, was joining in the fun. Until Lizzie reminded her of her manners. Queen fell silent then, her eyes down, fiddling with her handkerchief. Jass forgave Lizzie in his mind, as he always did, for he knew she was on edge about the day, and worried about her unborn child. He rode beside the carriage and talked happily to the children, and occasionally to Queen, who looked up at him with adoring, grateful eyes.

As they neared Florence, Jass began to regret his decision, for half the county seemed to have had the same idea. Carriages packed with countryfolk were descending on the town from all directions, and rough men on horseback calling

and hallooing to each other as if in boisterous anticipation of a wild party. Yet this is what it is, thought Jass, and I cannot shield them from the experience forever.

Isaac guided the horses carefully through the packed streets, and brought the carriage to a halt outside the bank, where Jass was to meet Tom Kirkman. The greatest crowd was gathered around the telegraph office, but throughout the town the fes-441

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tive, volatile air prevailed. People were milling around, aimlessly, excitedly, waiting for the news that might change their lives. Young men roamed the streets publicly announcing the glory of an independent South and the fate of the Yankees if Lincoln won, while older men on the hustings urged those same young men to join militia units, in preparation for the coming Armageddon, and other, more sober souls bewailed the catastrophe of secession, and the glory of the Union.

Queen found it all very frightening, and Lizzie was appalled. She hadn't wanted to come, certainly hadn't wanted to bring the little ones, but Jass had business to do, and she hadn't wanted to stay alone at The Forks without his protection, on this day of days. She refused to leave the carriage, and resisted her older children's pleas to be allowed to walk for a while, until Jass interceded on their behalf.

Mary looked at the paramilitary activity in wonder and a little fear.

"is there going to be a war, Papa?" she asked her father.

"Of course not!" Jass was reassuring. "Why would Americans want to fight Americans?"

No one had an answer for that. Except Queen.

"Perhaps because of slavery," Queen said, and made Lizzie angry.

“Hush, girl,” Lizzie snapped. “Speak when you’re spoken to. “

Queen looked down, and William jumped in. “It looks like war,” he said.

“It’s all a lot of fuss and bother about nothing,” Jass told them, with more conviction than he felt. Nor did he tell them why he was going to the bank. “Don’t you worry your little heads about it.”

He gave them a little money and told them they could look in the shops for half an hour, but they must be careful, must never lose sight of Isaac and the carriage, and should not, under any circumstances, speak to strange men.

“Oh, Papa,” William groaned. “Everyone knows us here.”

“Times have changed, and there are a lot of strange men in town.” Lizzie told him. “Queen, you may keep them company and look after them.”

They set off in high spirits, the three of them, William,

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Mary, and Queen, and excitedly nervous. Jass watched them for a moment, reassured Lizzie as to their welfare, and went into the bank. Lizzie stayed in the carriage with Poppy and the babies, and told Isaac to keep his whip ready.

It was the best fun. Queen was a pretty girl, and even the roughest boys made way for her as they passed by. Some whistled, which made William giggle. They stopped to listen to a very loud man on a soapbox, exhorting the brave to join his militia unit. He wore an old uniform that had seen action against the Indians in the West, and he was attended by a couple of younger men, in newer versions of the same uniform.

They didn’t really understand what he was shouting-it all seemed to be about blood and death and honor-and Queen thought the uniforms were ugly, but it aroused the older people listening, and they cheered and clapped everything he said.

It was a chilly afternoon, and they were quickly bored, and moved away to find other amusements. Farther down the street, a minister was on another soapbox, proclaiming the glory of the indissoluble Union that was the United States, but only a small group was listening to him, a few cheering, most booing, and a fight broke out between some young men and one of the minister's supporters. Queen tried to shepherd her charges away, but William made a fuss because he wanted to see the fight. Queen told him she couldn't stand the sight of blood, and reluctantly William agreed. They moved away, but fifty yards down the street they heard a wolf whistle. They turned to see that the three young hooligans from the fight were following them. They were poor whites, crackers, but dressed in their Sunday best.

"Those rude boys!" Mary was angry. "How dare they!"

William winked at Queen, stopped walking, and pretended to look into a shop window. "I think they like you, Queen," he said, for the fun of it all appealed to him. Queen wanted to be away, out of here, home where it was safe, as quickly as possible, but she had to attend William, and he seemed to be enjoying himself.

They stared in a shop window, and within moments, they saw the reflections of the young men behind them. They

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turned from the window and the young men tipped their hats. "Afternoon, sweetheart, pretty day," the biggest and handsomest said to Queen.

"We don't speak to strange men," Mary told them tartly, while William pretended to be doing nothing.

"Oh, we're not strange," another laughed. "Just strangers. "

"And we'd like to be friends," his pal agreed.

Mary could do a fair imitation of her mother as Southern belle when she wanted to. "Pay no attention to them," she told Queen.

“Oh, don’t be so heartless.” The first young man played his game. He had no interest in Mary, who was too young, but if she was companion to that older, dark-haired, violeteyed darling, that was fine by him. “We’ve come to enlist for the war, and you might be the last young ladies we talk to in years. “

“We might even die,” another chimed in. “Defending your honor. “

Although they included Mary in the fun, they were staring at Queen. It made her nervous, and she tried to hide behind Mary.

“My papa says there isn’t going to be a war,” Mary insisted, and the boys laughed.

“Then your papa doesn’t know much,” the third one, who was very spotty, said, and moved closer to Queen. “So how about it? One little kiss for a soldier on his way to defend your honor?”

He grabbed the terrified Queen and gave a peck on the lips before she really knew what was happening.

The boy grinned in triumph and his friends cheered. “There, that didn’t hurt, did it?”

It repelled Queen. She felt his hot breath on her face, stale with the smell of beer and unwashed teeth, saw spots of blood on his shirt, and knew it was the blood of the man the hooligans had beaten up. She felt the-power in his arms when he grabbed her, knew she would be helpless if he wanted any more from her. She knew he was white and she was a nigra.

She turned to William for help, and he had enjoyed the sport, but now took command.

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“I’m surprised at you,” he told them. “How dare you kiss my slave girl!”

The effect was startling and immediate, and was what William intended and Queen wanted. All sense of flirting deserted the young men, to be replaced by surly anger. For a moment, Queen thought they might hit her.

The one who had kissed her spat violently, and wiped his mouth, Queen saw hatred in his eyes, hatred for her.

“How was I to know?” He shouted his grievance to the world. “The bitch looks white.”

His friends were as angry. “Keep her off the streets; send her back to the cotton fields where she belongs,” the first said, as they moved away.

“Damned high yallas,” the third called back. “Ought to be put down at birth.”

They were gone, still shouting abuse, and Queen shivered in relief. She was used to slights about her color and her blood, but she had no experience of men, and had never encountered anything like this before.

She had seen for the first time what the other slaves talked of sometimes, this irrational urge of violence by white to black.

“Thank you, Massa Bill. I was scared,” she said.

William had been scared for a moment too, but was proud of the way he had coped, and continued his role as Massa.

“Pay no attention, they’re just poor white trash,” he told Queen.

But someone else was crying.

“I don’t want a war,” Mary sobbed, for the anger of the young men, and the violence behind it, were something she, like Queen, had never seen before. She longed to be back in the security of The Forks. “I hate soldiers.”

At The Forks, all was calm and peaceful. Angel, who was almost as old as Sally, climbed breathlessly up the stairs to wake her mistress from her nap, for visitors were expected. Sally was asleep on top of her covers, and woke to Angel’s nudging. She drank her tea while Angel fixed her hair, and prepared herself to

receive. She heard the gig in the driveway, and sighed, for she was not looking forward to her afternoon.

Henderson was wearing his best suit and had polished his

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boots to a military shine, for he was seldom invited to the big house for social purposes, and wanted to impress. His new wife, Letitia, wearing one of the fine dresses she had brought with her from Charleston, stood beside him, agog with anticipation at this sudden and unexpected leap in her standing, and determined not to be overawed by her surroundings or her husband's employers.

But she could hardly-restrain a squeak of amazement as Parson Dick opened the door and they swept into the hall, grander than anything she had ever seen.

"The Mistress is in the sitting room," Parson Dick said. He led the way, opened the double doors, and announced them. Sally, dressed in stem black, rose to greet them, and Letitia Henderson moved forward, took Sally's offered hand, and bobbed a tiny curtsy, which she immediately regretted.

Alec Henderson had not been immune to the talk of war, He had taken stock of his life and had decided to put his domestic house in order. He had advanced beyond his wildest imaginings. As he had predicted and intended, he had assumed the function of overseer when Mitchell retired, and worked hard and well in his new capacity. His was a tougher regime for the slaves than the previous overseer's had been, but something of Mitchell's attitude to the slaves had rubbed off on Henderson. He had been raised to believe blacks were scum and less than animals, but Mitchell had persuaded his able student that they were simply animals, valuable ones at that, and responded better to reasonable treatment than to ruthlessness. The abuse of his power, Mitchell told him, would simply lead to runaways and less productivity. At first, Henderson had dismissed the arguments. Seething with resentment toward his martinet father and the way he had been treated as a boy, he tended to vent his frustrations with his own life on those less fortunate than he, the niggers. Mitchell had seen this and had spent long hours with the young man, and become something of a surrogate father to

him. By example and patient instruction, Mitchell had calmed Henderson's rash temper and persuaded him that the proof of true power was in how little you needed to prove it. Whites were the natural masters of niggers, and they knew that and accepted it. Any brute fool could have

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a nigger whipped for. any small justification, but what did you do if the justification became greater? Have them whipped some more? Flog them till they were dead? Dead they were useless, and alive they were valuable livestock.

Henderson had never appreciated that slaves had actual and considerable monetary value before, and while Mitchell never changed the young man's basic attitude to blacks, his financial arguments had a profound effect.

For Henderson worshiped money, and was determined to have his share. He knew he would never be rich in the way Massa Jackson was rich, but if he did his job well, and saved carefully, he could look forward to the day when he would have a small farm of his own, and several slaves, and live in comfort and security for the rest of his life. It was all coming to pass as he had hoped. For ten years he had been overseer, living in the cottage provided for him, cooked for by a Jackson slave with provisions acquired from the big house kitchen, and had been able to save most of his wages. Once a year he gave himself a treat, a week's holiday by the sea at Charleston, and during that week he allowed himself a couple of visits to whores, but otherwise he lived a spartan existence and now had a reasonable stash of gold, which he kept in a strongbox under the floorboards of his cottage. He was not wealthy by any means, but he was better off than many of his unlanded peers. He was tough and aggressive with the niggers, and demanded hard work from them, but although he used the whip occasionally, he controlled his urge to flog them on any provocation, and things at The Forks were running smoothly, if not as moderately as once they had.

Success and security had mellowed him, and for a couple of years he had been thinking it was time to find himself a bride, but he couldn't work out where he might meet one. His position gave him occasional access to women of his new class, but he had no social skills with them, and was happiest in the company of other men. He wouldn't touch mulattas and despised white trash, for he had

grown up in their company and they reminded him too much of his disadvantaged youth.

Talk of war had given an urgency to his intentions for matrimony. If there was a war he would fight, for the idea of free niggers was viscerally repugnant to him. He had come to re-

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spect the skills of many of the slaves under his command, and guessed that some few of them would cope with the unthinkable, with freedom; some might even be -good farmers, and that made a mockery of his dear dead mother, and of the way she had worked herself to the grave, and died poorer when she left this world than when she came into it. But if there was a war and he had to fight, he would be away from The Forks. He doubted he would lose his job-the Massa could hardly dismiss him for defending the Massa's existence-but his cottage would be empty or, worse, occupied by some temporary overseer, and his store of gold left to the mercy of looters. He could not carry the precious metal with him, and he had no faith in banks.

A dutiful wife would solve the problem by remaining in residence and protecting his interests while he was away. The right wife would increase his standing in the local community. A good wife would look after him, provide him with a bed partner, and give him a son, whom he could teach to be as good a man as himself, and who would inherit all that Henderson was single-mindedly working for. Without an heir, his good fortune was meaningless, since he had no intention of leaving anything to his wretched brothers and sisters.

But where to find such a wife? Happily, the same possibility of war that had accentuated his problem also solved it for him. After harvest he had gone to Charleston for his annual leave and, bored with taverns and whores, had attended a meeting of militant Southern loyalists in a church hall. South Carolina was already threatening secession from the Union if Lincoln won the election, and the debate was firebrand stuff of white supremacy and Yankee knavery, and of the joy and prosperity that must dwell in every Southern heart if the slave states were forced to break away from the North. In Henderson's case, as with most of

those present, it was preaching to the converted, but it stirred his blood anew, and he decided on a visit to the whorehouse afterward. He never got there. When the speeches were done, refreshments were served by the women of the Church Ladies' Union, and Henderson's eye had been taken by the lovely Letitia.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but perhaps only Alec Henderson could have thought Letitia Palmer lovely. Most

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would have called her plain, but she was everything he was looking for in a wife. Moderately educated and obviously able, Letitia had a commanding personality and was always on the lookout for a spouse, for she was terrified that her prospects of a husband were close to nothing. Oldest daughter of a drunken father who held on to his job as manager of a lumber store by his fingernails and the fact that he was white, and of a hardworking mother who ran a moderately successful millinery shop, Letitia had nursed and raised her siblings, cooked and cleaned for all the family, coped with her sottish father when her mother could not, and spent her free time stitching in the hat shop. Now her younger brothers and sisters were old enough to fend for themselves, and she, with time for herself at last, found that she had missed the carefree boat of youth, and was in sharp danger of being left stranded on the lonely island of spinsterhood.

Because of her mother's hat-making business, she had teamed to conduct herself properly on the shopgirl rung of society, but no one had ever taught her how to enjoy herself. She had no idea where to find a husband and put her trust in God to provide a solution. A devout woman, she joined the Social Club of her local church, but she was so used to organizing her wayward family she overzealously organized everyone else, and was not popular. To compensate for this, she made herself indispensable, and now any social function connected with the church saw Letitia in command.

Thus she met a clean and sober young man from Alabama, and on discovering that he was unmarried, had prospects, and was looking for a wife, Letitia almost wept her thanks to the good Lord for showing her the way out of her valley of despair.

“Some more tea, Mrs. Henderson?” Sally asked politely.

The grace and elegance of the Jackson mansion, and the simple unforced authority that Sally possessed by right of rank, breeding, and money, had made the new Mrs. Henderson speechless with awe and envy for the first few moments of their visit, but she had quickly recovered, determined not to let her husband down, and equally determined not to let this rich old biddy get the better of her.

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“I think not, Mrs. Jackson,” she responded in her plummiest tones, learned in the millinery shop. “I believe I have had an elegant sufficiency.”

There was a tiny pause while Sally prayed that Jass and Lizzie would come home soon and save her from this dreadful creature, but she was gracious.

“Cake?” she inquired, when she could think of nothing else to say.

There was a commotion outside, and the sound of horses, and Sally could hardly hide her relief.

“I think that’s the Massa now,” she said.

Jass, carrying two small boxes with him, was in curiously high spirits, given the momentous news that they had learned in Florence. Lizzie was weeping at that same news, Mary was weeping because she’d told her mother of the incident with the three boys, and William and Queen had been severely scolded, and were pretending to sulk.

Isaac and Polly helped Lizzie and Mary from the coach, and Poppy with the youngsters, while Queen and William scampered after Jass.

“Mr. and Mrs. Henderson are waiting, sir,” Parson Dick told him.

“Oh, damn,” Jass responded. I’d forgotten-”

Lizzie was already on her way upstairs with Mary, giving orders to Poppy about baths for the youngsters, and telling William and Queen it was time for their supper. Jass knew he was on his own.

He went to his study, locked the small boxes in his safe, and strode into the sitting room.

“Sorry, the time slipped away,” he announced, kissed his mother, and looked at the overdressed, over made-up, overeager woman sitting expectantly on the edge of the sofa.

“Is this your bride, Alec?” He shook hands with Henderson. “You’re a sly one, keeping such a pretty woman secret.”

Mrs. Henderson was his loyal servant from that moment, and simpered, while Sally did her best to hide her amusement.

“Happened so fast, sir, on my leave,” Henderson began, but his wife was way ahead of him.

“Took one look at him and I said to myself, Letitia, I said, that’s the man for you,” she gushed.

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Queen and William had hung back from Lizzie’s commands and had their ears to the keyhole of the sitting-room doors. Parson Dick saw a perfect target, two round little rumps stuck in the air, smacked them both lightly and ordered them upstairs, where their supper was waiting.

“Young ladies and gentlemen do not listen at closed doors,” he commanded.

They yelled at his gentle smacks, and giggled their way upstairs.

When they were gone, satisfied that the coast was clear, Parson Dick leaned down toward the same keyhole.

“My dear mother’s heart is broken, of course, that I’m living so far away from home, and my poor father”—Mrs. Henderson took out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes—all this talk of war, and me getting wed, his only comfort is the gin.”

Jass did not dare look at Sally, but knew he had to give them the news.

“Then I’m afraid he’s going to need rather a lot of comfort,” he said with a poker face. “Abraham Lincoln has been elected president.”

He remembered his promise to tell Becky, but saw no sense in disturbing her evening. He would send Ephraim first thing in the morning.

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said to myself, Letitia, I said, that’s the man for you!” William giggled, in fair imitation of Mrs. Henderson’s affected tones. “Isn’t she awful? Why did he marry her?”

He was already in his nightshirt, and Queen was folding his clothes, as she always did.

“I think he’s worse than she is,” Queen said. She didn’t have much to do with the overseer, but whenever they met he was sarcastic to her, and to her mother.

“Perhaps they were made for each other.” William was

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bored with the subject and sat on the window seat. He was in a curious mood. The events of the afternoon had excited him. He’d seen plenty of fights at school, had taken part in several, but had never seen adults beating anyone up before, apart from when one of the slaves got whipped, and that didn’t count. The short, sharp, ruffian violence of it had exhilarated him and he had felt like cock of the walk, a few minutes later, at his ability to cope with the hooligans. The talk of war, the pounding hysteria when news of Lincoln’s election spread

like wildfire from the telegraph office, and the fun of Alec Henderson's matrimony had invoked some new, exciting emotions in him, which somehow all had to do with girls. They were on the brink of stirring times just as he was edging into manhood, and he longed to be older and part of it all.

He wondered if he was old enough to have a proper girlfriend, not like Harriet Peters whom he escorted to Sunday school. Ten years old, she sometimes allowed him to hold her hand, and once, sweating with embarrassment, he had pecked her on the lips, but she screamed, and slapped his face, and told him never to touch her again. Of course, she hadn't meant it, and sat next to him at Sunday school the next week, and shyly held his hand.

"I hope there is a war," he said, staring out at the moonlit, winter landscape. "It would be such fun." He had an adventurous soul, and found much of his life at The Forks boring. Lizzie was trying to mold him to be a Southern gentleman in the way that Becky had molded Lizzie to be a Southern belle, and William resisted it strongly. He was his father's son, and, like Jass when he was young, he wanted adventure, he wanted to be a pioneer, like Gran'ma Sally, only there weren't many frontiers left.

The South Seas, perhaps, or Australia.

Queen was also thinking of the afternoon, but had a different view. "I don't think I'd like war," she said. "It might be dangerous. "

"Oh, pooh," William laughed. "You wouldn't know very much about it. The men would all go off somewhere a long way away, and have a big fight, that's all. We'd beat the Yankees, they'd beg for mercy, and then it would be over."

"What if the Yankees won?" Queen wasn't convinced it would be so simple.

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"That isn't possible," William said seriously, "because they'd try to free the slaves and God doesn't want that. God's on our side."

Queen didn't say anything, because there was no point in arguing with Massas about slaves, but turned down William's comforter, and made the bed cozy with the warming pan.

William's thoughts turned from war to love again, to Letitia Henderson and Harriet Peters.

"I wonder what it's like to be in love?" That surprised Queen, because her mind was still with a possible war. She allowed herself to dream.

"I'm going to marry a prince on a white horse one day," she said, but William laughed.

"Oh, Queen, don't be silly. You're just an itty-bitty slave girl,"

William told her, kneeling beside the bed. "Who'd marry you?"

Queen knelt beside him and said something privately, to God: "Someone will, one day."

William had begun the formal prayers, of lying down to sleep, and souls being kept. His soul, and his family's, and even the soul of Harriet Peters. Not Queen's soul, of course, because nigras didn't have souls.

His papa had told him that, years ago.

"And please let's have a jolly fine war that lasts a long time," he ended up, but wondered if God would approve of his prayer, so he added a little charity. "But only let Yankees get killed."

In case that wasn't enough, he added a little more. "And send someone nice for Queen."

"Amen," both prayed, and laughed.

William climbed into the big four-poster with its warmed sheets and cozy blankets, while Queen snuggled into the uncomfortable pallet at the foot of the bed.

"Good night, Queen," William said affectionately, for they were friends.

“Good night, Massa Bill,” Queen said to her brother. They lay in silence, thinking their separate thoughts. Queen seldom voiced hers, because it was not her place, but told her feelings to her good friend God.

“If the war doesn’t last very long, I won’t be old enough

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to fight,” William lamented softly. “So where shall I find adventures? I suppose I could become a missionary or something-”

He was lulled to sleep by the balmy breezes of tropical islands, and the image of himself saving Harriet from some niggers who were cooking her in a big pot.

Queen could not go to sleep so easily that night. She didn’t mind William’s jibes about her matrimonial prospects, she was used to being called “an itty-bitty slave girl” because she was tiny and a slave, but she knew a handsome prince was waiting for her somewhere in the world, and not very far away. This night, she had other things to think about. Like many of the slaves, she knew that events of some importance to her life were in train, but she could not fully appreciate what they were, because she heard only one side of them.

The slaves in the kitchen talked about war, and even though they had no experience of it-what they knew was learned from other, older, field slaves who might have served with their Massas in the Mexican War-the stories didn’t seem to fit with William’s idea of one big battle a long way away.

Mexico was a long way away-Queen wasn’t exactly sure where it was-but she knew there’d been more than one big battle. Her gran’pappy had stories of war, too, and someone called Massa Andrew fighting the Injuns and the British, and those wars seemed to last a long time, and lots of people got hurt. She had heard Miss Sally and Julie making all sorts of plans for extra provisions to be put in the cellar, “just in case,” but if William was right, then just in case of what? If the fight happened a long way away, why were they stocking up with food here at The Forks? Was the fight going to be near here? The idea of war and battles close to the big house really scared her, especially if the soldiers were like the

boys who had accosted her that afternoon.

God's role in a possible war confused her most of all. She loved God as the Massa and Miss Lizzie and her mammy and gran'pappy and Miss Sally and everyone told her she should, but if God was on the side of the South, did that mean He wanted Queen to be a slave for all her life? Whenever she asked anyone questions about God and some of the confusing

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things He did, they all told her He moved in mysterious ways, and obviously that was true. She tried to imagine what God looked like, and saw an image of a big, cross old man with a long white beard, and thunderbolts in his hand, but that wasn't very comforting, and she was taught that God was love. The greatest love she could think of was for her pappy, and so she drifted to sleep dreaming she was tying in the Massa's arms, safe in the love of God.

Sally could not sleep. The news of Lincoln's election to the presidency had come as something of an anticlimax to her. Like a gathering storm, it had been on the horizon for months, sweeping toward them with increasing and inexorable certainty, but now that it had happened and had not plunged them immediately into war, it was something of a relief. Not that the danger was past, but Buchanan was still in the White House, it would be four months until Lincoln actually took office, and perhaps, in that time, sanity could prevail. She guessed that some states, at least, would go through the initial processes of secession. South Carolina had called a state convention to begin the process even before the election results were known, but South Carolina had threatened withdrawal from the Union before, and had always backed down. And no one, surely, wanted war, no one wanted the dismemberment of the country. Sally knew very few people who actually advocated disunion, but all those same people believed that if push came to shove, the Southern states could go it alone. The problem was that they might not be allowed to, for Lincoln seemed to care less about the freeing of slaves than he did for the maintenance of the federation.

And what was so important about emancipation? Why were the wretched abolitionists so strident in their views? Why had the Yankees been foolish

enough to elect Lincoln? Confusion set in, for she knew in her heart that it was not just the Yankees who had voted for Lincoln; many Southerners must have done so, if only out of fear of the consequences of secession. Briefly she cursed all men, vain creatures who insisted on imposing their views on others. Finally, she realized that what she wanted was for the South to be left alone, to go about its business, and if that meant a confederation of Southern states,

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then perhaps it was the best solution. There was no need for war. Please, God, don't let there be war. Yet she wept, for she had loved her nation all her life; she had been proud to be a citizen of the United States. For eighty years that blessed country had thriven and prospered, and that it should all end now, over an issue that was irrelevant to the general welfare of the majority of the people, was untenable to her. Why should slavery bother the North when they did not have it?

It would be a bleak Christmas, she thought, and practicality salvaged her from despair. There was so much to do, so many presents still to buy-they hadn't even begun to plan the menus yet-and she took refuge from the depressing affairs of the day in lists of provisions and gifts.

Realistically, she knew that her lists would have to be longer than those usual for Christmas, since they had to be prepared for the worst. Already, with Parson Dick and Julie, she had made sure the cellar was well stocked, but she would have to lay in more blankets and sheets, and check with Jass that the bams were full. Like sheep jumping fences, the lists lulled her, and she drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Lizzie had been feeling chills of fear since that afternoon, when the wild atmosphere in town had disturbed her, and the chaos that surrounded the announcement of the election results had terrified her. Lizzie had never seen such violent emotions on display before, and if this was what the prospect of war could unleash, she dreaded to imagine the unknown horrors that the fact of war must bring.

Lizzie was essentially secure and happy in her life, and, like Jass, she loathed change. Jass had proved to be a good and undemanding husband.

Lizzie's more dominant personality amused him, perhaps because he had a refuge from it, and he indulged most of her foibles. He asserted his conjugal rights from time to time, but because he was temperate in his demands, Lizzie was happy to accommodate him. She hated the pain of childbirth and its attendant illnesses, and wondered if the illnesses were not brought on by fear of the pain, but it was her duty to provide Jass with children, and so she bore them with fortitude. She had been desolate when tiny Jane died, so soon after childbirth, and she prayed that her new

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baby would be strong and healthy, a boy, she hoped, in case anything awful should happen to William. Like war.

Sally looked after most of the domestic issues, leaving Lizzie free to socialize and entertain, and while the two would never be close, they had become friends. Lizzie could shop and party, and never have to worry about the dinner menus unless she chose to, and then Sally always deferred to her. She could fret and fuss over the children, or Becky, and Sally would always be there to offer advice and a grandmotherly shoulder for the children, or Becky, to cry on. Lizzie could pamper and spoil Jass, when he allowed her to, or ride around the estate in the company of the politicians and business associates who called with increasing frequency because of the political crisis, or because of their genuine fondness for Jass and his increasing interest in the affairs of their state, and some of them, perhaps, because Lizzie was such good fun.

She had learned to tolerate Queen, who was meek and demure to her, which flattered Lizzie, and she enjoyed the sense of power it gave her over Easter's brat. She had even learned to tolerate Jass's continuing relationship with Easter, because it was discreetly conducted, and relieved Lizzie of at least some of her duties in the bedroom.

Now she believed this almost flawless life was under threat, and she was frightened. It was no use looking to Jass for comfort; he only laughed and said they might all be better off if Alabama did secede. He was almost enjoying

himself, Lizzie thought, and had spent much of dinner gossiping about the new overseer's wife, whom Lizzie was sorry she hadn't met, because she sounded dreadful. Whenever she or Sally had tried to talk about the ramifications of Lincoln's election, Jass had been patronizing, and told them not to bother their pretty little heads about it. That had made them cross, but he was so dear and jolly, the meal had passed pleasantly enough.

The evening had been different. Sally had retired early as she often did.

She had a little sitting area in her room, and she liked to go there and be alone, and write her diary. Jass and Lizzie had sat together, as they always did, but he had his head stuck in a book. Lizzie did some petit point, and all her fears for the future had simmered through her again, but Jass had been no comfort.

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She wanted to be alone with him, not alone as they were here, but upstairs, in bed, drifting to sleep in his safe embrace. She put down her needlework.

"I think I'll go to bed," she said, and kissed him, hoping he'd get the hint.

He looked up from his book. "Sleep well, my love," he said.

So that was it. He was going to her. She didn't want him to go, not tonight. How could he be so thoughtless?

"Will you be long?" She could hardly express her need more plainly.

"Oh-a while," he responded. "I have some things to do."

For an instant, she hated him. She could well imagine what it was he planned to do. But she needed him, or his reassurance.

"Is there going to be a war?" Her voice had a tiny quaver in it, like a lost little girl.

Jass heard the cry for help, and closed his book.

“I’m sure not, my dear,,” he said calmly, kindly. “I’m sure it’s just talk.”

She almost believed him, and felt foolish for being scared. He was always so reasonable, and knew so much more about what was going on than she, who wafted on the vagaries of any fashionable wind.

“It’s so scary, war,” she said. She looked at him longingly, hoping he would change his mind, and left the room.

Jass put down his book, and sat in silence. Lizzie was right, it was so scary, war. Yet exciting, too, for the talk of it, the rumor of it, the prospect of it, made Jass feel as if he had just wakened from a deep and lengthy sleep.

For fifteen years, he felt, he had done nothing except live a prosperous, pleasant, unambitious life. For fifteen years, he had been Massa of this plantation, yet he had allowed others the control of it. Tom Kirkman and Sally between them managed most of the business affairs, largely because Jass did not really understand the complexities, and had no real urge to learn. He knew that his patrimony had decreased in that time, because while Tom was a conscientious and able bookkeeper, both of them erred on the side of caution, as if neither was

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prepared to put the great inheritance at risk. Yet by not taking risks, by swimming with the tide, by having no vision, he had wound up with an estate worth today perhaps half what it had been when James died. Jass had always believed himself to be a simple caretaker of the family fortune, but now he saw that he hadn’t taken care of it very well. There had never seemed much point. He’d never be able to do what his father had done, create an empire, and to grasp at something when you didn’t believe you could achieve it was a waste of time. He had no real interest in politics, as his father had had, no interest in the wheeling and dealing and political chicanery that were necessary to an illustrious

public career, no real interest in anything other than trying to be a good husband and father.

He wondered where his dreams of youth had gone. He no longer felt the urge to settle on the frontier, or cross the Rockies, or see California.

It might have been different if he'd gone with Wesley to Texas, all those years ago, and left the inheritance to one of his brothers, but his sense of honor and responsibility would not have allowed him to do that. He wondered what it would have been like if A.J. had lived and become Massa, and Jass had been free to follow his own star, but he wasn't sure what his star was.

Even in the trivia of life he had failed to be his father's son. James had been one of the most renowned breeders of Thoroughbred horses in the country. Jass had a few fighting cocks, which didn't do very well in the pit.

For fifteen years, then, he had jogged along with no sense of direction, and the estate had dwindled around him. Now Fortune had matched him to his time, and he stood on the brink of his adventure.

Secession by at least some of the Southern states would happen. Jass was sure of that. And since those states couldn't survive on their own, they would band together in some way, and a new golden age of prosperity lay before them. Free of the constraints of Washington, of federal regulations and tariffs, free of the debilitating need to defend and fight for their right to own slaves, this new confederation of Southern states could form its own alliances and trading patterns and partners, and the resulting wealth would no longer have to subsidize

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the impecunious Northern industries and the increasing bureaucracy of the federal government. The many visitors to The Forks over the last few months had persuaded Jass, if only because of the residual influence of his father's name, that he could be a voice in this New Jerusalem, and Jass had been flattered and motivated, and had agreed. The Southern states would be free at last to become masters of their own destiny, and he would be part of it.

If the North let them. Few of Jass's friends wanted war; they wanted to be left

alone, to get on with their own business, and if that meant leaving the Union, so be it. But the North, that is, the federal government, that is, Lincoln, had sworn they would not, could not, leave. The Union would be preserved, no matter what.

Well, some of them were going to leave-it was as certain as night follows day-and then Lincoln could either back down or go to war. From all he had heard, Jass did not believe that Lincoln would back down, and the idea of war between Americans was not new. Bloody war, civil war, had existed in Kansas for almost all of the decade. Settlers from the North were determined the territory should be admitted to the Union as a Free State, and others from the South had been as determined on an opposite outcome.

Jass no longer cared if slavery was right or wrong for others; it was right for them, for the South. He had seen the figures for the plantation, and knew that the Jackson fortune would dwindle even further, might diminish entirely, without slaves, and this was true for most of his peers. It didn't matter to him that slaveholders were a minority of the Southern population: Slave owning was the Southern way, the basis of the Southern economy; it kept the few wealthy, so that prosperity would trickle down to the many. Without slavery, the South could not exist.

Nor could he bear the thought that his own niggers, whom he believed he cared for and protected, should end up as homeless beggars in city slums, as he had seen in the North. He had no desire to increase the realm of the South; if the new states and territories wanted to be free of slavery, then let them join a free-state Union, which is what he believed Washington now represented.

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For there was no real union between the North and South, and never had been. Eighty years ago, a group of sovereign territories had joined together in a common cause, and once the British were defeated they had little in common. All the arguments and treaties for union were a waste of time, because disunion was inevitable. The Missouri Compromise, Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act, and so many others were all attempts to paper over an essential gulf.

“A house divided against itself cannot stand,” Lincoln had said, and Jass agreed with him. And since the house was divided, then let it fall into its separate parts. His fervent prayer now was that the North would not interfere with the Southern ambitions, but if they did, if there was war, the South would fight to protect its own, and Jass would fight to protect what was rightfully, morally, his. And they would win.

Lizzie had been wrong about his plans for this evening. He would go to see Easter, but later. First he had other, more important things to do.

He went to his study, opened the safe, and took out the two small boxes Tom had given him at the bank. Each was filled with a thousand gold coins, British sovereigns. Jass went down to the cellar and buried one of the boxes in a small hole that he had prepared the previous day, under the duckboards, so that it would be unseen.

He took the other box, a lamp, and a small shovel, and went out into the wintry night.

Not far from the weaving house, in a small grove of trees, was an old, spreading oak. The ground around it was hard, but Jass was full of vigor, and he quickly dug a hole, laid the box in it, and covered it over. He tramped on the freshly dug earth, covered the small scar with dried leaves, and hoped for rain to disguise his handiwork, but in any case he had chosen his spot carefully. Few people had any reason to come here.

The physical labor had tired him and energized him, and now he went to Easter.

She was in bed, asleep, but stirred when he came in. She lay silent for a while, watching him wash his hands in the basin.

“What you bin doin’?” she asked.

He turned and smiled at her. “Nuttin’,” he said. She knew better than to question him further.

He stripped off his clothes, and climbed into bed with her, snuggling hard against her, letting her body warm him.

She stroked his hair, and bided her time. She always knew when he needed to talk to her.

"There's going to be a war, Easter," he said at last.

She did not really understand the implications, very few people did, for wars didn't happen in Alabama, except once, long ago, against Indians, but no one could remember that, and Indians didn't count.

She understood one thing, though. She knew the war would be about slavery, and that if the North won, she might be free. It frightened her, for she didn't want her life to change.

"Because of slavery?" She knew it, but wanted to hear him confirm it.

"Yes," he said.

They lay in silence again, while another, as frightening, thought crept up on her.

"Will you fight?" Her voice was a tiny whisper.

He didn't speak, but she felt his head nod.

"Because of slavery?"

Now he moved astride, and looked into her eyes.

"Because of you," he said. "Because I couldn't bear to lose you."

Love of him swept through her, and she gave herself to him, and when he kissed her, he ignored the taste of salt tears on her cheeks.

Afterward, they drifted to sleep, but woke as they always did, just before

dawn. He dressed and went back to the big house, and remembered to tell Ephraim, who was already at the stables, to fide to The Sinks and tell Miss Becky that Lincoln had won the election.

Ephraim stared at him for a long moment.

“We gwine be free, Massa?” he asked.

“Hope not,” Jass replied blithely. “I couldn’t afford to pay you wages.”

He went upstairs, took a bath, dressed for breakfast, and came downstairs again. Which is when Ephraim came back with the awful news that Miss Becky had died in the night.

Jass told Lizzie himself, and William and Mary, while Lizzie wept. The rest of that day was spent in coping with the bereavement.

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It was not until two days later that he had the time to take Sally for a walk to an old oak tree behind the weaving house. Already there was scant evidence of the hole he had dug. He showed it to her, in case anything should happen to him, and told her of the small provision it contained for their uncertain future.

Pocahontas Rebecca Meredith Boiling Perkins was buried two days later in a simple grave next to that of her dear departed husband, William. Her death cast a further pall of despondency over the Jackson family, and no one except Jass looked forward to Christmas with much enthusiasm. Lizzie took to her bed for a week, partly out of grief for her mother, partly out of concern for the general political situation, and partly out of care for her unborn child. Sally took over as surrogate mother, and tried to brighten everyone’s spirits, but she was concerned

at what the coming year would bring, and had no real heart for frivolity. William and Mary had never experienced the death of a loved one in any real sense—they had been too young to fully understand the passing of Gran’pa Perkins—and Becky’s death disturbed them greatly. Christmas became more of a religious holiday than a festive one to them, for death and the dangerous times had turned all their thoughts to God.

Except for Jass, who mourned for Becky but gloried in the preparations for the coming Southern triumph. He spent little time with his family, but journeyed each day to Florence, to plot and plan with likeminded friends, and to be near the telegraph office. Hope of a bright, independent future, and the excitement of possible action, overrode their genuine fear of war. All of them believed that the critical arguments between the North and the South, as old as the country, had to be resolved, but there were many who were dedicated to the Un-

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ion, and the arguments for and against breaking away raged between lifelong friends.

In the middle of December Jass received a letter from his old college chum, George Pritchard. The letter was friendly and informative, describing the Northern attitude to the election, and the present public mood. Although a few thought that if any Southern states wanted to secede they should be allowed to go in peace, for it was not worth blood to keep them, most of his friends believed that the Union must be preserved at no matter what cost, and the truculent Southern states be brought to heel. George reiterated his strident opposition to the institution of slavery, and asked Jass to cast his lot with those Southerners, and there were many, George thought, who believed in emancipation. Most of all, he begged Jass to use whatever influence he had to persuade his political friends in Alabama not to take the dangerous path of disunion.

“We are the future,” George wrote, “it is molded by us, and perhaps the die is already cast. But we cannot go lightly into this unknown territory, for it may bring the end of that which we both hold dear and for which we would gladly

have given our lives, our country. We are one nation, under God, indivisible. It is my most fervent belief that the new President will act most forcibly against any attempt to wreck that covenant, and that will set friend against friend, cousin against cousin, brother against brother. Surely there must be a way to bring about a peaceful resolution to this crisis, for I cannot believe that, in your heart, you wish to kill me, just as I have no desire to destroy you. Yet if the extreme voices on both sides have their way, that will surely be the outcome, and all of us will lose.”

The letter ended warmly and affectionately with the compliments of the season to all the Jacksons from all the Pritchard family, and George wished especially to be remembered to Cap’n Jack.

Jass was touched by the letter. He read it twice and then put it away in a drawer. It was too late; the die was already cast. Alabama would not be the first to secede, and if no other state did, Alabama would not, he knew from discussions with his political friends. But if another state took the giant leap first, Alabama would not be the last to follow.

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On the twentieth of December South Carolina adopted the ordinance of secession from the Union. Throughout the state the announcement was greeted with bands, church bells, and cannon fire, and joyously received by the populace. Whatever their attitude to South Carolina’s actions, the rest of the South held its breath, but nothing happened.

Outgoing President Buchanan chose to do nothing. The president-elect could do nothing. So nothing was done.

Euphoria swept the South. Sanity had prevailed. South Carolina was now a sovereign country, and no wrathful Yankee army challenged her independence. Christmas Eve in Florence was as splendid and exultant as anyone could remember. The churches were full. The shops stayed open late; the taverns didn’t close their doors. The streets were thronged with people, all wishing each other, from the bottom of their hearts, the merriest Christmas and the happiest of

all New Years.

There were dissenting voices, those who, like George Pritchard, took their pledge of allegiance to the Union as a most solemn vow, but they were lost in the extravagant excitement and the general relief that there wasn't going to be a war, Jass was euphoric, and galloped home from Florence, shouting the news to anyone who might listen. He gathered his family into his joyous embrace, and Christmas became, after all, a splendid celebration, with Jass the most genial Santa Claus.

The slaves at The Forks had no cause to celebrate or the means to do so.

South Carolina's action was fatal to their dreams, and the lack of retaliation by the North proved the promises of Linkun to be empty. They knew little of him except what they had heard through the grapevine, but they had allowed themselves to believe, because they wanted to, because they needed to, that he represented a possible end to their bondage. Now all they saw was a future as hopeless as their past.

Cap'n Jack shut himself in his cabin, and swore he would not come out until he was carried out, in his coffin. Queen was allowed to spend part of Christmas Day with her mammy, and she and Easter went to Cap'n Jack's cabin and banged on the door, begging him to join them at the weaving house, but he would not. The last best chance of seeing freedom in his

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lifetime was gone and now he wanted to die, he shouted at them.

The women shrugged and left him to his tantrum. They spent a happy day together, with no special celebration, content to be in each other's company, and content with the way the world was going, for neither of them wanted war, neither of them particularly wanted the slave dream of freedom to become reality without the condition both women attached to it, which was that they be allowed to stay at The Forks, in circumstances they both understood. For each woman, in her separate way, loved the same man, and that man was their Massa.

Parson Dick was as depressed as Cap'n Jack, but had a happier solution.

He stole a bottle of brandy from the cellar and decided to get drunk. Not wanting to be alone, he tucked the bottle under his jacket and went to Cap'n Jack's cabin.

"Go away," the recluse shouted.

"I got liquor," Parson Dick called softly.

After a few moments of silence, Cap'n Jack opened the door. Parson Dick went inside, and the two old friends drowned their sorrows in Jass's good cognac.

Like the other slaves, Parson Dick had heard the rumors that this new president was their champion against slavery, but he had more immediate reasons than most to hope that the rumors were true.

For Parson Dick had fallen in love.

A few months ago, the Coffee family had requested that Jass loan them Parson Dick for a week. Their own butler was ill, they had two important functions to host, and it seemed silly to buy a new slave, but they would happily pay for the temporary butler. Jass, genial as ever and having no particular need of Parson Dick that week, had agreed. Slaves were frequently hired out to others, and their Massa paid for their services, so Parson Dick made the short journey to the Coffee plantation on the other side of Florence with his warrant of travel in his pocket, and quickly took charge of the household. As he was serving port one evening, a guest commented on the excellence of his manners. Massa Coffee laughed, and said he hoped so, the damned nigger was costing enough. Then Parson Dick found out that Jass was receiving forty dollars for his hire, with not one cent of it going to the slave.

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Expert at simple arithmetic, Parson Dick multiplied forty dollars a week by

fifty-two, and realized that if the money had come to him he would be earning over two thousand dollars a year. Parson Dick was stunned. He knew he had value as a slave-on the block he would have fetched a splendid sum, perhaps as much as three thousand-but that was a once only figure, and this new sum represented a regular income. Like every slave, he longed to be free, longed to be paid for his labor, but because the dream of freedom was so elusive, he had never bothered to work out what he might earn when that glorious day came.

Two thousand dollars a year! It was a phenomenal sum, and it infuriated him that Jass was receiving that money and not he. Later that night he sat in the kitchen with Ruby, the Coffee housekeeper, with whom he had struck, up an immediate friendship, and poured out his grievances to her.

Ruby was completely sympathetic, completely understanding, completely supportive, and even more bitter about her circumstances than Parson Dick. She had been owned for many years by a Massa in Georgia, had nursed him through his ailing final days, and on his deathbed, he had promised her freedom. Once the old man had gone, his surviving relatives saw no need or reason to honor the pledge, and had sold Ruby to her present owners.

Fueled by Parson Dick's indignation, she worked out what her weekly value might be, and the pair realized that, jointly, they would bring in over three thousand a year. If they were free. The figures shocked them.

They also realized that they wanted to be together, to be a pair, to be married, but they had no way of achieving it or, if they did marry, of living under a common roof, for they had separate Massas and lived on different plantations. It was remotely possible that if they told their Massas of their love, then the Coffees might trade their butler for Parson Dick, or the Jacksons swap their housekeeper, Pattie, for Ruby, but it was unlikely. It was too complicated. Slaves chose their partners from other slaves on their own plantation, not from the world at large.

And neither Parson Dick nor Ruby wanted to be wed in slavery. The life they envisioned together in the Coffee kitchen was as a working pair, living in freedom, earn-

ing their joint income. Much as they adored each other's company for the short week they were together, the driving force for both of them was their innate fury at their status. Desperate overachievers, they lived in the ill-founded hope that excellence at their jobs would earn them their freedom. They preferred to maintain that fury, and that hope, by being forced to live apart when they were so blatantly intended for each other.

If they were free, they promised each other, it would be different. And they would be free, one day.

They sustained a curious relationship by sending occasional messages to each other by way of other slaves. When the seed merchant made his rounds of the plantations, his boy would bring messages of affection from Ruby to Parson Dick, and the draper's assistant would return the sweet nothings when he journeyed, by a rambling route, from The Forks to the Coffees.

The excitement surrounding the election of Lincoln had persuaded Parson Dick that freedom for the slaves might become a reality, and so the lack of any action by the Yankees against the state of South Carolina was an especially bitter blow for him.

"Never going to happen," he told Cap'n Jack, slurring his words through a small pond of brandy. "We ain't never going to be free. "

Cap'n Jack agreed with him, and they both got even drunker, and swore eternal friendship. Then both were sick, and passed out, and had foul heads the next morning.

In the big house, New Year's Eve was an even happier celebration than Christmas. Jass and Lizzie gave a party for friends and family, and even though Lizzie was still distressed by her mother's death, she had come to terms with it, and was, again, a splendid hostess. William, George, and Alexander came with their wives and new families, and Elizabeth and Tom, with their hordes of children. Sam Kirkman, their eldest son, was with them, and Elizabeth his wife, and Elizabeth his baby daughter. Sam had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard, and was now practicing medicine.

Jass joked that if there was a war, Sawbones Sam would be in his element, but everyone laughed, because nobody believed anymore that there was going to be a war.

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Queen was allowed to watch the dancing from the hallway, but when the clock struck midnight she was alone.

They sang “Auld Lang Sync,” and then Jass raised his glass in a toast.

“To the South,” he cried, and most of them raised their glasses.

“To the Union,” Sam Kirkman said softly in the silence while they drank.

No one cheered, no one drank with him, and it soured the party atmosphere for a while. But Lizzie was too good a hostess to let a little thing like politics, and an argument between close relations, ruin everyone else’s fun. She organized music and dancing and distracted the children with silly games.

Sam’s quiet affirmation of loyalty to his country depressed Jass. He watched the games with Lizzie for a while, and kissed away the few tears she shed because Becky was not with them to celebrate. Becky had always loved parties, as did Jass, but now he was a different man, and Sam had killed his appetite for celebration. He wandered away from the group, and tried to avoid his nephew.

He saw Queen sitting alone on the stairs watching the fun. Since it was such a special occasion, he took a glass of champagne to her, and sat on the stairs with her for a while, chatting about the evening, and wished her Happy New Year.

Queen had never tasted champagne before, nor any alcohol, and even though it was only a small glass, just two or three sips, she loved the sweet, sparkling drink, and the bubbly effect it had on her. It made her want to dance, and her body swayed in time to the party music. Jass saw what was happening and smiled. He stood and offered her his hand, asked her if she would like to dance.

Queen could not believe her ears. This must be what Jane called being drunk, for it was unreal to her and wonderful. She sat staring at her adored father until he smiled again, and repeated his request. Believing him now, Queen accepted his offered hand. Jass led her to the center of the hallway, and to the distant music they could hear from the ballroom, he danced with her. They were alone, the two of them, in the vast, empty hall, the portraits of their ancestors staring down at them.

It was the happiest night of Queen's life.

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The Southern celebrations continued well into the New Year. Not even the seizing of United States arsenals provoked a reaction from Washington.

There was a small hiccup in early January when someone burst into the tavern in Florence, where Jass was drinking with friends, to tell them that President Buchanan was sending a warship to reinforce the federal garrison at Fort Sumter, a small island in the middle of Charleston Harbor. They all raced from the tavern to the telegraph office, where the news was confirmed. There was general astonishment that it was the passive, lame-duck Buchanan who had taken this aggressive action, and a general, sobering realization that there were many federal army forts throughout the South. If there was to be war, the North had a natural advantage. A few men immediately enlisted in militia units, for there was no Southern army yet, while the others champed at the bit for news, and insisted that Alabama should show her solidarity with the sister state.

Jass, wanting to be close to the source of news, the telegraph office, slept at the hotel for the next few nights, to the distress of both Lizzie and Sally, who felt he should be at home with them. For the following week, the South held its breath. Six days later, they heard that the ship carrying the reinforcements, the *Star of the West*, had turned about under fire from Charleston shore batteries, and jubilation returned. The independence of South Carolina had been challenged, the rebellious state had won, and on the same day Mississippi withdrew from the Union.

“The Yankees,” Alec Henderson told Letitia, “are all piss and wind.” Mrs.

Henderson clucked at the language, but forgave her husband because these were stirring times, and she agreed with him. Still, she determined to try to curb his potty mouth when order was restored to the land.

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Momentous news now reached them with dizzying speed. Almost every day, it seemed, another state seceded. Florida, and then, to considerable rejoicing in the streets of Florence, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas were the next to leave.

When the telegraph officer rushed out to tell the assembled multitude that Kansas had been admitted into the Union as a slave-free state, he was jeered and pelted with mud and small rocks. He got a cut over his eye, but took it in good part. It was only sport, the boys were in high spirits, and who needed Kansas?

Delegates from the seceding states were to meet in Montgomery, Alabama, to form a new provisional government. Jass had no official role, but was set upon a political career and had many friends of influence, so he decided to attend, if only as a spectator. Lizzie and Sally were inclined to argue with him, but Jass lost his temper. They were all perfectly safe at The Forks, he assured his women; no harm could come to them. The North was not going to do anything to hinder the rebellion; they were having a peace convention in Washington, for heaven’s sake. And even if some retaliation did eventuate, at some later time, Florence was a very long way from the center of any possible action.

“What if the baby comes?” Lizzie asked him, crying softly, but even the prospect of a new child, another son perhaps, did not deter Jass.

“You’ve had babies before, and it isn’t quite due yet,” he whispered to Lizzie.

“I’ll only be gone for a couple of weeks. “

Thus Jass went to Montgomery, and was present at the creation of a new country. The name chosen for that new country was the Confederate States of America, and Jass was profoundly moved. This was how it should be, he thought; this was how it should have been all along, for the very name itself represented what he believed America to be. A confederation, a group of sovereign states banded together in a common cause, not a federation, which implied surrender of power to a central authority. When Jefferson Davis was presented to them as president, the bands played what was to become their

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anthem, and Jass sang “Dixie” as loudly and lustily as anyone there.

He rode back to The Forks with a full heart. Now that the deed was done, it was as if a festering boil had been lanced. He was filled with a sense of peace and purpose. He attended his family with care and affection, and went about his business with an unaccustomed vigor, for now the new country had to be made to prosper.

It didn’t matter that the new country had no treasury, Jass, like many others, invested heavily in Confederate bonds, believing them to be gilt-edged. They had cotton and powerful allies, for Great Britain had to protect the supply of that cotton to its mills in Manchester. Even if the North was initially belligerent to the South, it was unlikely to take on John Bull, and must eventually accept the fact of the new Confederacy.

The two nations of America would live in harmony and prosperity, and the Jackson fortune would become greater than ever before.

But what was a country without a king? Sally was less sanguine about their prospects. Although she believed in the idea of confederation, she had no faith in

prospects. Although she believed in the idea of Confederation, she had no faith in Jefferson Davis as their leader. She had met him several times when James was alive and active in politics, and was astonished when he was chosen as their president. The Confederacy needed a visionary general, not a pedantic schoolmaster. An intelligent and erudite man, Davis had an unpredictable temper, and was given to prolonged bouts of melancholy.

Sally had known many powerful men, with Andrew Jackson, whatever his faults, as the greatest, and could not see in Jefferson Davis the dynamic aura of natural leadership. Whatever his political skills, he had no charisma, and in a moment of absolute panic, Sally saw the unraveling of the complex tapestry that had so recently been woven. Unlike Lincoln, Jefferson had no popular mandate and few skills of oratory, and she could not imagine anyone following him to death or glory. The South was bound together by a single idea and a single issue, slavery, and for that moment of panic she could not imagine that the idea itself was strong enough to bind them through the prospective crisis. The Union had been based on a single idea and a single issue, but

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that idea was freedom. Was slavery as powerful an ideal?

Still, she had no choice but patriotism and cast aside her doubts.

Provided Lincoln did nothing rash, and the South nothing to provoke him beyond its simple existence, they might prevail.

In March, Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as president of the United States of America.

And still there was no war.

In April, Lizzie gave birth to a son, who was christened James, after his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

Transcendent emotions flooded Jass as he held his new son for the first time. A new boy for a new country. It seemed so fit and proper, and Jass, who had

never been unusually religious, was moved to an extraordinary awe of God, his creator. He fell to his knees, prayed for a peaceful life for his new son, and made a most sacred, solemn oath to defend the boy's patrimony with every drop of blood in his body.

On the same day, the Confederate States demanded the surrender of Fort Sumter, and when the Federal commanding officer, Major Anderson, declined, Southern bombardment of the island began. Anderson surrendered two days later, and two days after that, Lincoln declared a blockade of Southern ports and called for seventy-five thousand volunteers for three months.

The immediate Southern reaction was simple indignation. If Lincoln thought he could whip the South in only three months, he had better think again, they told each other.

Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee seceded from the Union, a rampaging mob attacked Union troops in Baltimore, there was a stirring parade by the Alabama Dragoons through the streets of Florence, and Jass enlisted as a private in the 4th Alabama Regiment.

He looked very fine in his uniform of simple gray, uncluttered by decoration. He had not discussed his intention to enlist with any of his family, but had gone with Henderson to a meeting at the Wesleyan, Hall in Florence. He heard the speeches and watched the fellows enlist, and the ladies present gave them little Confederate flags as they did so.

Jass knew he had no choice. He could easily have avoided military service, for he owned more than twenty slaves and was, by de-

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cree, exempt. He could as easily have formed his own regiment-he had the financial means to do so-and ridden off to glory as their colonel. He could easily have deferred any decision until the course of the war was known.

But not to fight was the coward's way. Jass believed in his cause, and his sons, William and James, gave quickening momentum to his ideals. He had heard the cries that it was a rich man's war and a poor man's fight, for the slave-owning rich were a small minority in the South, and to give the lie to that, he resisted a commission. He enlisted as the common man enlisted, and would fight beside the common man, for the common cause.

Lizzie fainted when he told her, and on recovering, screamed her distress, but Sally's heart filled with love for her son, and pride that he had so stalwartly heard the call.

Her heart was overflowing again now as he stood before them to say his goodbyes.

It was a perfect April, a day he would dream of in the dark nights to come.

The family was gathered on the veranda, slaves watching from a distance.

Henderson was near the magnolia tree saying goodbye to his wife. They had debated his enlistment several days before it happened, but briefly, because Letitia was in favor of it. She was proud of the man she had married, a good honest laborer, and believed it was his God-given duty to fight for his country. She didn't love him as Jass loved Easter, or even as Lizzie loved Jass, but she was fond of him, cared for him, and while she would miss him, she doubted that any real harm would come to him. The war would not last long, a few months at most, and it would be almost two months before he came within sight of a Yankee army. And even if he was hurt, or killed, she would have reason for pride in him. She had been happy with him for the few short months of their marriage, but it was the fact of her marriage that was most dear to her. Life as a widow was infinitely preferable to life as a spinster, which had seemed to be her fate but a few months before.

Henderson, on the other hand, was excited at the prospect of a few battles, and bloodying some Yankee noses, for he was bored with his life as an overseer. It was the same thing,

day in, day out; the only challenge was the weather, which no one could predict, and keeping the niggers in line, which wasn't hard when he held the whip. Married life had been interesting for a few weeks, but Letitia was a stem taskmaster, always on his back about something or other. She had less patience with niggers than he did, and was forever urging him to flog them more, which made life difficult because he remembered and respected Mitchell's advice to him-it had served him well. Letitia kept a good house, and was obliging in the cot, but he had started to miss his freedom.

He went to see Mitchell, who agreed he should enlist, and agreed to visit The Forks from time to time to check that things were running smoothly.

They found a young man, Tom Parsons, to fill in as temporary overseer, and when Henderson went with Jass to the Wesleyan Hall, he had already decided to join up. He waited till Jass took the plunge first, for Henderson thought it was sensible that the two of them be in the same regiment. Jass Jackson was his bread and butter, and he'd be able to keep his eye on the Massa, who wasn't, in Henderson's opinion, cut out to be a soldier. He was surprised, and a little disappointed, that Jass went in as a private. If he'd been an officer, Henderson could have been his sergeant, but there was never any point in telling Jass when he had his mind made up, so Henderson had accepted his fate and followed his Massa.

Now, standing under the vast magnolia, he kissed Letitia politely, said all the right things, he hoped, mounted his horse, and waited to follow the Massa again.

Jass shook William's hand. The boy had been excited at seeing his father in a soldier's uniform, but now fear assailed him and he was close to tears. His training stood him in good stead, and he didn't cry, but hugged his father hard. Jass kissed Mary, and said goodbye to the little ones, then moved to his mother.

Neither said anything for a moment, and both smiled a little, but without joy.

"I hate to see you go," Sally said.

“I hate to have to go,” Jass told her, although it was not entirely true.

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Sally embraced him. “Be brave,” she whispered. “Do your duty.” She didn’t want him to go and she didn’t want him to die, but he had to go, and she put her faith in God that he would not die. She knew that she would have to say goodbye to all her sons, for all had enlisted, and it was probable that one of them, at least, would be wounded, or worse. But a man was either brave or he was a coward, and it had comforted her during the last dark days before Jass’s departure to know that all her sons were brave.

Jass held her close for a moment, and the truth of his circumstances hit him hard. He longed for war, he longed to prove himself in battle, he felt he had wasted too many years of his life, an idle, rich man’s son, and now he had the opportunity to be the man he had always promised himself he would be. But he had to face the truth of it. It was war, and he might die.

The smell of his mother caressed him, the smell he had known all his life, from before his memory of it. This is what he wanted to take with him; this is what he wanted to remember of home, the loving embrace of his mother.

He had another memory to take with him, but it was not of home. It was of the woman he cherished and to whom he had never been a failure. It was the memory of Easter, plump and full now but as exciting to him as she had always been. He had spent some of the previous night with her, after Lizzie was asleep, and when dawn came he told her something that was important to him.

“If anything should happen to me,” he whispered, “always know that I will have loved you until the moment of my dying. “

He knew that she understood, because she hadn’t wept, as Lizzie had been weeping for days, but had held him to her, and had hummed a lullaby from some place deep inside her soul, just as she had on their very first night together, and he had drifted to sleep in her arms, knowing that he was loved.

Easter was standing with Queen, at the end of the veranda, watching him say goodbye. Jass moved reluctantly from his mother to Lizzie, whose face was blotchy with tears.

“This is it, my dear,” he said, for want of anything better to say. He wished he could think of some intimate truth to give her in farewell, but he could not say to her what he had said to Easter, because it was not true.

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Lizzie was distraught. “I can’t bear it,” she cried.

“I’ll come home safe, I promise,” he said. Suddenly, he grabbed her, held her to him, kissed her hard, and forced his tongue into her mouth. For suddenly he hated himself. The memory of his farewell to Easter rang in his ears, but she was a nigger, and Lizzie was his wife, mother of his children. It was Lizzie he was ready to die for, to protect.

“I love you,” he whispered harshly, when his mouth was free. But Lizzie would not let him go. She hung on to him for dear life.

“Don’t go,” she screamed. “You don’t have to go!”

Letitia Henderson clucked in disapproval, and glanced slyly at her husband. She thought Mrs. Jackson would have had a greater sense of proper behavior.

Jass tried to pull himself away from Lizzie, but she clutched at him, tried to drag him back, screaming at him.

Sally moved to help, but Lizzie was a frantic woman, and Sally too frail.

None of the other slaves dared touch their hysterical mistress, and so Jass had to do the unthinkable.

He called to Easter and Queen.

They did what had to be done, and pulled Lizzie from him.

“Go now, Massa, quick,” Queen said, when he was free. Lizzie was sobbing desperately, in Easter’s arms, but still Jass couldn’t go. There was one more thing to do.

They looked so frail, so helpless: his old mother, his weeping wife, and his little children. Even William, trying so hard to act like a man, was obviously only a boy. Someone had to take care of them.

“Look after them, Queen,” Jass begged. “They need you.”

It was a sublime moment for Queen. The Massa, her father, had given her charge of his family. It was a sacred trust.

“Yes, Massa,” she promised. “Good luck.”

Family matters done, he was anxious to be away. He walked quickly to his horse and mounted, and together he and Henderson galloped away down the drive.

Queen ran to the edge of the lawn, to wave farewell. Easter had given Lizzie to Sally’s care and now walked slowly to join her daughter. They stood together and watched Jass go.

Queen looked at Easter, with the question that was always

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in her eyes. She had asked her mother outright, only a few days ago, when Jass first enlisted. Seeing him dressed like a soldier had frightened Queen; she didn’t want him to go to war, she didn’t want him to die. She ran to her mother in the weaving house and poured out her distress. Easter, as always, had comforted her and stroked her hair.

“There, now, chile, he’ll come home safe, I promise,” she crooned.

“You cain’t know that,” Queen muttered.

“I ain’t never tole you a lie,” Easter said.

It was true, Queen thought, her mother had never tied to her. But perhaps she had never told her the complete truth, either.

“Then tell me true now,” she said. “They say the Massa’s my pappy. Is it true?”

Even now, after all these years, Easter resisted it. She didn’t believe it could do any good for Queen to know, yet she knew Queen did know.

“It don’t matter,” she said, and turned away, but that was not enough for Queen.

“It matters to me,” she cried, “coz half of me is missing!”

She had to make her mother understand why it was so important. “I’s black but I look white. You’re my mammy, the black side of me, and I love you. “

She turned her mother’s face to her. “But who’s the other side of me?” she begged. “The white me. Where’d she come from? “

Easter was crying. She understood her daughter’s need. “From love, chile, I swear to you,” she said. “From love.”

They stood together now, in front of a grand house on a little hill, and watched him fide away to war.

It could not matter now, Easter persuaded herself. And told Queen the truth.

“Pray for yo’ pappy,” she said.

It was as if a great weight was taken from Queen’s shoulders. In a practical sense it made no difference to her lifeshe was still a slave-but things that had never made sense to her now became clear. She knew she’d always knownher father’s constant visits to her mother, the way he had protected her and taken her into the big house, the way he had

treated her with some slight special attention, the things that other slaves had told her-but it had been knowledge without knowing. To know the truth for a fact was different from guessing it by rumor.

She waved to her pappy until she could no longer see him.

They rode for days, Jass and Henderson. At every village and town they passed through, others joined them, and others again as they rode on, until, by the time they reached the North, they were a great army.

But why that army fought, the purposes of its war, had never been explained to those who were the ultimate cause of it, the slaves.

Sally believed that if the slaves did not understand the reasons for the war, they could become the enemy. With so many white men away, discipline would become increasingly difficult, the number of runaways would increase, the work force would slowly disappear, and the problems of running the new country would be insurmountable.

Someone had to make them understand why white men were ready to shed their blood to defend the institution of slavery. It was not, in Sally's mind, just for the benefit of whites. It was for the good of the slaves as well.

She had Tom Parsons gather them together one evening, shortly after Jass had left.

She stood in the middle of the clearing, surrounded by all her family, for she had insisted on their presence, and Mrs. Henderson. The house slaves stood to her right, the field slaves in front of her. Queen and Easter stood together, but apart from the others, for they belonged to neither group.

Tom Parsons cracked his whip and yelled at the slaves to be quiet, which was unnecessary because no one was talking, and Sally stepped forward.

"We are at the beginning of a great adventure," she told them, her voice crisp and clear in the warm night air. "And only the good Lord in heaven knows how

and when it will end. “

She paused for a moment. She had practiced the speech several times, but it was important to her that they understood how passionately she believed in what she was telling them.

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“Some of you will have heard that this war is being fought for and against slavery, but that is not true. The South is fighting to protect its own way of life.”

Tom Parsons had his eye out for troublemakers, but found himself paying more and more attention to Sally’s speech. He was young and impressionable, and had never really understood what the war was about. He’d been excited by the founding of the Confederacy, and had caught the general fever of war, but his Godfearing parents had told him that it was the beginning of the Millennium and heralded the Second Coming of Christ, which dashed his exuberance. Sally seemed to have a more pragmatic view.

“The alternative is too dreadful to imagine,” Sally continued, “especially for you nigras. You have all heard the stories of your people in the North.

Of hunger, and sickness, and poverty. Of homeless nigras forced to beg for crumbs of bread, of sleeping in gutters, dying friendless and alone.”

Very few of the slaves had heard those stories. It was not what they knew of the North, of freedom. And even if the stories were true, they did not matter.

“That is not our way,” Sally told them. “When you are born, we nurse you.

When you are hungry, we feed you. When you are sick we nurse you, when you are old, we care for you, and when you die, we bury you. That is our Christian duty.”

She was completely unaware of an unspoken dialogue going on among some of the slaves. Jeremiah, the blacksmith, simmered with anger. He was a skilled

and able tradesman, and he believed he could make a good living for himself and his family, if given the chance. The chance was all. If it was his destiny, which he did not for one moment believe, to die alone in a Northern gutter, then so be it. He wanted the choice, he wanted to be free, to succeed or fail, and no one, for all Missy Sally's fine speeches, had the right to deny him that. He looked at some of the other slaves, and knew he was not alone in his anger.

The slaves had discussed the war as avidly as any whites. Many believed that it heralded the glory day of deliverance. John Brown had been the harbinger, and Linkun was the new Messiah. Fervently believed rumors told the slaves that 01' Linkun was amassing a righteous army that would sweep

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through the South, gather the dispossessed black peoples into its bosom, and lead them to the mountain. A few, the old and less able, those without family, were scared, for they had never known any other life than that of a slave, and despite the tantalizing hope that freedom promised, it was new, unknown, and frightening territory.

For some, mostly the able-bodied younger men, it could not come quickly enough, and a few, like Jeremiah, were realistic enough to comprehend that the South would not yield easily. The war would be bloody, and it was possible the Yankees might lose, although it would be a cruel God who gave victory to the South. All Jeremiah wanted was his chance, which might, he thought, be now.

"I cannot believe, in my heart, that God, in His infinite wisdom, could allow us to lose this war," Sally said. "But He helps those who help themselves, and so it is our bounden duty to strive together, to keep our houses and our fields in good order, until the blessed day of peace comes, and brings our men safe home. I ask you to kneel and pray with me."

Tom Parsons closed his eyes and prayed most fervently. The others knelt, obediently.

"O Heavenly Father," Sally led them in prayer, "our Creator and Provider, we pray to You now in this our hour of need. We beg You for peace, O

Lord. We beg that in Your infinite wisdom You spare lives that would be needlessly lost in battle, but, if war it must be, that You grant victory to our glorious Southern cause.”

Queen and Easter were not praying for the war, or for the South, but for Jass. As Sally did now.

“And we ask You to bless and protect our beloved son Jass, to keep him from harm, and bring him safe home to the bosom of his family. But if his time on earth is done, we pray that You receive him in Paradise, and attend him with angels.”

“Amen,” Queen whispered.

“Amen,” Easter whispered.

“Amen,” chorused the slaves. Those that were left.

When Tom Parsons opened his eyes, he had a bit of a shock. He was sure that a few of the slaves were absent. He said nothing to Sally, but when she had gone back to the big house, he did a head count.

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Jeremiah and three field hands had gone missing during Sally’s prayer, as well as Alphis, Jass’s new valet from the big house. Taking advantage of the chaos that war must bring, and believing that the Massas had better things to do than go chasing after a few niggers, they had taken their chance. Away, away down Freedom Road.

Tom Parsons, who had been responsible for them, was too young, too callow, and too scared to face the wrath of his employers, and ran away himself.

He spent the night in a friend’s barn near Florence, crept into town before dawn, and enlisted in the army.

When the bullet burst into Jass's chest, he felt as if he had been hit by an invisible steam train. The brute force of it knocked him to the ground, senseless.

He came to a little later, and had no idea where he was. It was still daylight, and there was this awful pain in his chest. Around him, he could hear a few whimpers for help and shouts of pain, and somewhere a long way away, a distant cheering, but otherwise all was quiet. He moved his hands, to see if he could, and then felt his chest. It was wet and sticky, and Jass knew it was his own blood.

"I am dying," he thought, without any sense of fear. He prayed that death would end the pain, which was becoming unbearable. Just when he thought he could not stand it anymore, when he must scream to the very heavens to make it stop, his body was kind to him, and he passed out again.

He drifted to the surface sometime later, and the pain was still there. It was dark now, or nearly so, and he could still hear the cries of wounded and dying men all around him. He tried to sit up, but that made the pain worse. Mosquitoes buzzed in his ears, and their bites added to his misery.

He fell

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back on the ground, waited for something to happen, and commended his soul to the mercy of sweet Jesus.

Jass and Henderson had journeyed to the North, to Richmond, Virginia. They were given some peremptory basic training, their horses were requisitioned for

other purposes, and their regiment was assigned to Manassas. It was a road and rail junction on a stream, Bull Run, which ran into the Potomac River. The commanding officer, General Beauregard, was a splendid veteran, who kept his soldiers from boredom by long hours of training. At first, the green troops responded well, and a sense of camaraderie developed among them. They lived in tents, ate simple food in almost ample portions, and spent the long, oppressive summer nights singing songs of their youth, or telling tall tales, or writing to loved ones. Those who were illiterate found educated friends to write their letters for them, and Jass, who longed for action, was a popular scribe.

So the nights passed pleasantly enough, but oh, the days! The days were hot and unbearably humid, and the steamy weather enervated them, sapping their resolution as surely as it drained their energy. Their thick woolen uniforms chafed at their perspiring bodies, and the endless hours of drill and instruction rubbed at their spirits. Chiggers burrowed into their flesh, mosquitoes sucked on their blood, and lice nested in their hair and clothes. They cursed their officers, cursed their wretched lot, and, above all, cursed those wretched Yankees, who had brought them to this hellhole, and were too chicken to fight *

The day will come, their officers told them. The day will come. Toward the middle of July, rumors reached them that a vast Yankee army was amassing a few miles away. They were put on alert, but no attack came, and scouts reported that the Yankees seemed more interested in setting up camp than waging war.

“All piss and wind,” a disgruntled Henderson told his fellows, for he was anxious to fight, to get it done, and get out of this accursed place. But not to home. To some other, more congenial site of battle, and he prayed that the war would not be short. Despite the miserable conditions and his constant discomfort Henderson was actually enjoying himself. Secure

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with himself, for he was, by his lights, a very successful man, his years as an overseer, as an organizer, stood him in good stead. Older than many of the volunteers, he found that the other men respected him and looked to him to interpret their officers’ commands. He became a sergeant by natural process, long before he was promoted to the rank, and he relished the rough and ready masculinity of a soldier’s life. It was as if he had spent the rest of his life in

training for this time. He'd never had much fun, he'd worked hard to advance himself, he'd settled to a comfortable married life, and now, suddenly, he was free of social ambitions and could be the youth he had never been. He thought fondly of Letitia, and wrote to her regularly, in simple terms for he was not well educated, but he looked forward to some leave as a soldier because women of a certain class loved soldiers and would do anything for them. Anything. He had a good supply of wild oats that he had never sown when young, and when the chance came he did not intend to be mean with them.

They lived on rumor and wild speculation, and when the news that the Yankees had attacked spread through the camp like a grass fire, every man stood to. And stood down again. It was only some small skirmish on the other side of that deep stream. Still, something had happened. Southern reinforcements were on the march to them, they heard, and, not quite as green as they had been a few weeks ago, they knew a battle was looming.

When Sunday came, they knew this must be the day. for groups of civilians were gathering on a nearby hill to watch the coming fray. Many came in carriages, were elegantly dressed and had picnic hampers, as if to watch soldiers die were a charming Sunday diversion. Southern spectators might have done the same if the situation had been reversed, but the sight of all these Northerners come to watch the bloodshed caused a deep and abiding anger in many a Rebel soldier's heart.

Jass simply waited to be told what to do. His company was assembled, and stood in ranks in the blazing sun, weapons primed and loaded. On a small hill across the stream, cannon were being assembled by blue-coated soldiers, aimed directly, Jass thought, at him. They heard distant cries and gunfire, and

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then silence again, and then a rumor swept the ranks that the Southerners were retreating. Fear snaked through the men, and a few boys began to whimper, convinced that this was their last hour on earth. Then other rumors were whispered along the ranks. There had been a retreat, but General Jackson and his men stood like a stone wall against the advancing Yankees. The tide of battle

had turned.

Jass was puzzled. He hadn't expected war to be like this. It was possible, if the day went on like this, that he would not see any action at all. He did not know what he had expected war to be, but he had not thought it would be boring.

They were assembled about a mile from a stone bridge, hot and sweating under the blazing sun. Still they could hear distant cries and gunfire, but now the shouts seemed to be coming nearer, and hope started to blaze in their hearts, for these shouts were not of anger, but of fear. The sound of panic ran toward them at the speed of men in retreat, and suddenly it burst upon them. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, a great mass at least, of Union soldiers were running toward the bridge, to cross to the North, to safety. Now the cannon on the opposite hill started firing, as if to protect the fleeing men.

Jass's troop was given the order to charge, and hearts surging with glee at the sight of the retreating Yankees, blood pounding with expectation of a fight, fear of dying the adrenaline that made them brave, they charged toward the bridge.

Jass had no sense of place or time. He was an animal now, intent on his prey, in the middle of chaos and confusion. Sounds thundered about him, of guns and screaming and, loudest of all, his own blood throbbing in his ears. The very ground under him seemed to shudder as cannon balls landed among them. He looked once toward the distant hill, where the cannon were, and saw lines of soldiers dressed in blue and tiny puffs of smoke coming from their guns, but he did not hear the sound of those guns until some moments after the smoke had appeared. Then something hit him with the force of an invisible steam train. He felt a searing pain in his chest, and fell to the ground, senseless.

He was found later that night, unconscious and bleeding, lying in a field of dead and wounded men, by a friend who did not recognize him.

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Wesley was a veteran of killing, an able and eccentric fighter, who had spent the past twenty-five years in a wild and lawless life. He was a gun for hire, an Indian

fighter mostly, who spent his days slaying braves, and his nights in sweet domestic comfort with his Comanche squaw. They lived in a little shack by a pleasant river in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and Wesley had a fine collection of Indian artifacts, and several Redskin scalps. But already the frontier was not what it had been; settlers were slowly occupying the pristine territories of Wesley's youth. Federal soldiers were building forts and governments were whining about law and order. Although there was land enough to spare, and adventure enough for any man, the wilderness was slowly being tamed. Wesley wondered if he was simply getting old, for the chase had lost its thrill, his squaw and half-breed children bored him, and he was disgusted by the ambitions of so many of the settlers, who lived in fear of the hunting grounds and were determined to bring a bourgeois civilization to what had been primeval. The Indians were not his enemy anymore; the white man was.

When he heard of the possibility of war between the North and the South, he knew where he wanted to be. He made provision for his family, saddled his horse, and rode to Richmond, where he offered his services, by old family connection, to General Beauregard, as a scout.

He cut an unlikely figure. His hair was long and held back in a ponytail; his face was weathered and gnarled. He wore a traditional uniform, but wore fringed leather decorated with several small Indian totems to ward off the evil ones, and a tanned human scalp hung from his belt. He lived rough and alone, in a small teepee he had made for himself, and men laughed at him behind his back, but feared what he represented.

He was an excellent scout, and it was he who had warned of the first Union reconnaissance of the day, which had been routed. He was furious at the initial Southern retreat, for a man stood and fought, and he won or he died, but he did not run. He had approved of General Jackson's exhortations to his men to stand firm like a stone wall before the Yankees, and he had nodded in satisfaction at the subsequent Yankee withdrawal, which turned into a panicked rout.

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Now he wandered the battlefields alone. He was not averse to scavenging

from dead men, but his true purpose was as an angel of mercy. If he found a man alive but mortally wounded, Wesley used his hunting knife to help that man into the dark night. If he found a man alive but simply wounded, he would call the medical orderlies, for they, as green as the soldiers, had no experience of the carnage of war, were overwhelmed by the numbers of the injured, and could not always differentiate between those who would live and those who would die.

So it was that he found a man who seemed familiar to him, and carried the wounded Jass, fireman-fashion, to a medical tent, for this one, Wesley knew, would live.

,Duty done, he slipped out into the night again, back to the killing grounds, and went about his business.

Sam, Sawbones Sam, bright medical star of the Kirkman family, had traveled with his mother, Elizabeth, to Richmond to stay with friends, for he knew his services would be needed. When news of the battle reached him, he went to Manassas and offered his services. It was Sam's first experience of war, and when the bodies, hundreds upon hundreds, were brought to the medical tents, he had initially been appalled at the useless carnage. But his training served him well, and he patched and sewed and cut and amputated, and comforted those who were beyond his help.

Like the young soldier, who could not have been more than eighteen, who had fallen under some horses and had been fatally trampled.

"Am I done for, sir?" the boy had asked, and Sam had told him the truth.

The boy was silent, and then admitted his most private fear.

"I'm scared, sir," he said.

Sam was used to death, although never in such quantity.

"It's easy," he told the dying boy. "You will see a great light, and all you have to do is follow it."

The boy was silent again, but had another awful fear. He had not joined the

army for any great cause, although Dixie, glorious to him, was cause enough. Bored with his life on a small farm, he had enlisted for excitement, for adventure. In

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other times, he might as easily have escaped the monotony of his life by seeking his fortune in a big city, and he had left home with a solemn promise to his mother, which both of them knew was useless, to avoid harm's way.

"What will my mother say?" he said so quietly that Sam could hardly hear him.

He closed his eyes, and Sam knew he would never open them again. He sat with him for a little while, for his own benefit as much as the dying boy's. It was nearly dawn, and he was exhausted by blood and pain and death.

It happened quietly, peacefully, and no one but Sam marked the boy's passing. Sam sighed, and turned to the man lying on the next blanket, who would live. His awful chest wound had been bound with bandages, and he had been sleeping from the effects of the laudanum that Sam had given him from his small, private stock, but now he was drifting to the surface. He opened his eyes.

"How is it, Jass?" Sam asked.

"Bloody dreadful," Jass replied, for the effects of the opium were wearing off, the pain was filtering through his lungs again.

He tried to focus on the face smiling down at him, and a fragment of memory came to him.

"Sam?" Jass almost smiled.

Sam nodded, and Jass closed his eyes, for Sam would protect him. If he could be protected. He looked at Sam again.

"Am I dying?" he asked his nephew.

“No, Jass, you’ll live,” Sam told him. “I worked my guts out to save you.”

Relief flooded through Jass, but then he winced in pain. Sam gave him a little more laudanum. The army did not approve of lulling drugs for enlisted men. They were too costly, and might lead to addiction, but Jass was not a soldier anymore, only Sam’s uncle.

“You had a bullet through your lung,” he said softly, as if it was good news. “And you’ll be no more use to the army.”

Jass could not begin to assimilate the implications of that, for something else had a greater importance.

“Did we win?” he asked.

“Yes, we won,” Sam said.

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Jass almost smiled. “Then God be thanked,” he whispered. “I wouldn’t have wanted to die for nothing.”

Two days later they moved him to an army hospital at Richmond, where Elizabeth, his half sister, took charge of his nursing.

He was released from the hospital and honorably discharged from the army, but he was still unfit to travel and spent the early fall recuperating from his wounds at the home of friends in the lovely Virginia countryside.

“It is the end of the war for me,” he began a letter to his mother, but then put down his pen in bitter disgust.

He had not expected it would end like this.

Queen didn't know what to do. Her father was coming home. Much as she longed to see him, she felt she had not lived up to his expectations of her. She had been charged by him with a most sacred, solemn duty, the protection of his family while he was away, and she had failed. It might have been easier with a full complement of fellow slaves to share the burden, but they were reduced to half their number. Julie, the cook, was dead. There had been a brief epidemic of typhoid in the summer, and Julie and some others had succumbed to it. Polly was gone, fled with a field hand. Since Tom Parsons, the replacement overseer, had mysteriously disappeared, discipline among the field slaves had fallen apart, and several had run away. There were slave catchers, but they were mostly old men and young boys, and the number of runaways in the district so large that there was little hope of any but a few being recaptured. Mitchell had tried to help, but he was old, his arthritis troubled him badly, and he had simply stopped coming to The Forks. Pattie was still there, but she was not young, and was always sick. She was shamming, Queen was sure, but had no way of proving it. Poppy had

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taken over the cleaning, but the big house was too much for her; she grumbled and complained, and shirked her duty, and spent most of her days loafing in the laundry room.

Mrs. Henderson was worse than useless, constantly demanding help from the slaves, and as constantly telling Sally and Lizzie to use the whip to maintain discipline. Queen was the most common target of her waspishness, for Mrs. Henderson thought the girl was uppity and should be kept in her place. Queen was scared of Mrs. Henderson, for she still had authority as the overseer's wife, even though he was away. She could tell terrible lies to the Massa and Henderson when they returned, and possibly have Queen whipped, which she had threatened to do herself.

The house had to be run and the cotton had to be picked, and there weren't enough able-bodied people left to achieve either. Parson Dick divided his time

between the house and the fields, picking like a veteran, Cap'n Jack struggled to keep up with him, and Easter helped Queen with the cooking for the family. They had managed tolerably until Mary and Little Sally got sick, and then Easter had to spend her days nursing them.

Miss Lizzie was worse than useless, imaging herself as mistress of what had once been, and now frantic with worry for her babies. Miss Sally tried to help, but she was old and walked with a cane, and her eyesight wasn't the best anymore, and William had his schoolwork to worry about.

It fell to Queen to look after Eleanor and baby James, who, mercifully, hadn't caught the diphtheria, and it was Queen who went out into the fields and yelled at the slaves to pick cotton. Sally had called on Massa Tom Kirkman for help with the harvest, but he couldn't find any extra hands. Every plantation had a similar problem, and most of Tom's family were gone, his older sons enlisted, his daughters married and caring for their own families, his wife, Elizabeth, nursing in Richmond, and his younger children trying to run their own house. He had organized a picnic at The Forks one Sunday, and brought with him several friends and relations. They made a party and picked cotton, the whites out there in the field with the blacks; it had been tremendous fun, and they'd gathered a good crop, but it was a drop in the ocean of what had to be done, for the harvest was bountiful that year.

QUEEN 491

And it all had to be picked because they needed the money. The Confederate dollar was worth only sixty-seven cents of a Yankee dollar, and was dropping like a stone every day. The price of cotton had fallen because of the blockade of Southern ports, and so they needed every boll they could get.

The fields spread white to the horizon, and the gold that cotton once had been became a curse to Queen. If it was not picked soon, it would rot and be useless.

She sighed, and bent her aching back to the task. Because she was so tired she didn't get enough sleep, and because she didn't get enough sleep she was always grumpy, and because there was so much to do, she didn't know what task to

attend to first. Except to pick cotton.

Today she had baby James and Eleanor with her, because Easter was tending the invalids. They were no trouble, James slept happily in the little wooden cot that Queen had once used, and Eleanor played at the side of the field, and watched over James, but they were an added responsibility, and she had to go to them every hour at least, and see to their needs.

If only Jass would come. The letter said it would be at least a month before he returned, and Queen didn't know how to cope for another four weeks. Or even one.

As she picked, she grumbled, enumerating her woes to God. Parson Dick laughed at her, and told her it was a waste of time-God was white and didn't listen to niggers-but Queen told him to mind his business. Parson Dick laughed again, and stretched his back. He looked at the acres of cotton that still had to be picked, and wondered why he bothered. Who would whip him now, if he did less than he had to? He could run away, flee with his darling Ruby, and probably avoid the slave catchers, but where would they go, who would employ them, how would they live? Nothing had changed. Between them and any safe haven was the whole hostile territory of the Confederacy, and sympathy for runaway slaves was nonexistent. Those that had gone were fools, Parson Dick thought; a few might make it to the North, but most would be recaptured and imprisoned or pressed into further labor by unscrupulous whites.

. So Parson Dick stayed, and because he had formidable resources of pride in himself, he put his hand to any task that

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came his way, and did it with a will. The other slaves were grumbling at their increased work load, and slowing down when they needed to speed up, for cotton was their bread and jam in these uncertain times.

What they needed was a Massa, and since no Massa was there and Queen had too much else to worry about, Parson Dick took on the role of leader. He started to sing, softly at first, a work song, and soon it caught on and lifted everyone's spirits, for this much, at least, was as it had always been. They were picking

cotton.

The calming sound of the work song drifted to the house. Sally heard it and it cheered her soul. It was the first positive thing, no matter how tiny, that had happened since Jass went away. The absence of the Massa had created a void in all their lives, which no one could fill, but now he was coming home and everything. was going to be all right again. That he was wounded distressed her; that he was out of the army did not. He had done his duty, and was needed here, for home was the battlefield now.

The letter from Jass had arrived the previous evening, Torn had brought it, and Sally had struggled to read it in bed, but her eyesight was too bad. She had forced Queen to read it to her that morning, when they were alone in the kitchen after breakfast. Queen still denied she could read, although everyone knew it was a lie, and, as Sally had said to her, who would whip her for it now?

She wondered if Queen had told the other slaves that Jass was coming home, and that was why they were singing the work song, but she guessed not. The return of the Massa had little meaning for the slaves.

Upstairs in the nursery, Lizzie heard the distant song, but it brought her no solace.

It wasn't fair of God to let her babies die. He couldn't be so cruel!

Yet they were dying, Lizzie knew. Mary and Little Sally had diphtheria, and there was nothing anyone could do. She'd nursed them for days, wiping their fevered brows, praying for their return to health, sleeping in a chair beside them, so they would know their mother was always near.

She was so tired. All she wanted to do was sleep, but she couldn't sleep until her little ones were better. Or gone. But they couldn't go, not yet; she had to make them hold on, just for a little while longer, another few weeks, because Jass was coming home, and when he came back they'd get better, because when he came back everything was going to be all right again.

Easter was with her, bathing the sweat from Little Sally's face. The child's breathing was labored, and Lizzie was in despair. I

"She's slipping away, I know she is! Do something, Easter," she begged the slave.

"Nuttin' we can do, Miss Lizzie," Easter said softly. ... Cept pray. "

Anger at her own inadequacy to help her children swept over Lizzie, in mounting hysteria. She got to her feet, moaning, and paced around the room, looking frantically for something to do.

"We can't just sit here! My poor babies-" she cried.

"Hush, now, Miss Lizzie," Easter said. She got up from the bed, and took Lizzie by the shoulders to calm her.

But Lizzie's fury exploded. Her frustrated passions finally found a focus. She hit Easter's comforting arms from her.

"Don't you touch me, you nigra slut," she screamed. "You want my babies to die. You don't care about them; all you care about is your brat, Queen! Haven't you had enough from me'? You stole my man! Now you want my babies dead, too!"

There was no consistency in her thinking; all of her hurt over the years and all of her present impotence came flooding out. She ranted and whimpered by turns, her arms flailing uselessly.

Easter, not knowing what else to do with the hysterical woman, slapped her hard across the face.

Lizzie was stunned. She could not believe a slave, this slave, had touched her, struck her.

“How dare you,” she whispered vehemently. “I’ll have you whipped, I’ll have you sold away. Get the overseer!”

Easter remained calm.

“Ain’t no overseer here, Miss Lizzie,” she said. “There’s only us, now, We got to help each other.”

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The simple, calming truth of it forced its way into Lizzie’s fractured mind, and for the first time she genuinely understood the fact of their appalling circumstances. Her passion spent, she slowly dissolved into tears, and folded into Easter’s arms.

Easter led her to the chair and sat her down.

“There now,” she said. “You sit here with your babies. I get you some broth.”

Lizzie nodded, still crying, and took Little Sally’s hand, held it to her cheek, while Easter caressed her the while, and then left the room.

Through all the days of her children’s illness, it had never occurred to Lizzie that Easter was almost as sick as they.

Halfway down the stairs, Easter felt faint, and leaned against the wall for support. It was only a fever, she told herself, it would pass. She was flushed and sweating, and a wave of nausea passed through her. She had to sit down on the stairs.

She didn’t know how long she sat there, but after a little while she felt better, and hauled herself to her feet. As she did so, there was a scream of distress from the nursery. Easter clutched the banisters and started to make her way back up.

Sally came into the hall and tried to climb the stairs, but stumbled a little. Easter saw her and went to help.

“Don’t worry about me,” Sally cried. “The babies!”

But Lizzie appeared at the top of the stairs, carrying the dead Mary in her arms.

“She’s gone,” she said simply, and stood there, not knowing what else to do.

Easter ran up the stairs to the nursery. Sally struggled to follow, but before she was halfway up, Easter came back out to them.

She shook her head. Lizzie sank to the floor, keening for her dead children.

All the lifeforce seemed to drain from Sally, and she let out a great animal howl].

How could God be so cruel?

They buried the two little girls in the family cemetery. It was a pretty spot, and peaceful, in a grove of trees, sheltered from the world. The slaves’ graveyard was on a hill a few hundred yards away.

QUEEN 495

Cap’n Jack and Isaac had dug the graves the previous day, and the preacher came from town to bury the children. Lizzie was very brave and didn’t cry. Dressed in her mourning black, she seemed to have found some unexpected reserves of strength in her grief, and held William’s hand throughout the service. Mrs. Henderson cared for Eleanor and James, because Easter was sick in the weaving house, and Queen was picking cotton. William was distressed, but Lizzie was good with him, and told him that the babies were in a far happier place.

When the service was finished, Sally stayed behind and watched Cap’n Jack fill in the graves. The sound of earth falling on the tiny coffins distressed her,

and she wandered away to the grave of James, and wondered if he knew what straits they were in.

“Why did you leave us so soon?” she whispered, and for a moment she understood all of Becky Perkins’s longings to cast aside this mortal coil and lie in eternal bliss with the man she loved.

It was a warm, gentle evening, and peaceful here, away from the tribulations of the world. The presence of her old friend comforted Sally’s bleakness of soul. Cap’n Jack seemed to understand her mood. His work didn’t take long, for the graves were small. He laid aside his shovel and sat near his old mistress.

For a while, neither felt the need to speak, and then Sally voiced a little of what was in her mind.

“So many dead,” she said, looking about the graveyard. “So many that we loved.”

“We all got to die, Missy,” Cap’n Jack said softly.

Sally nodded. How long would she live, and what new tribulations were in store? But Jass was coming home, everything would be all right again, and her thoughts turned to happier times.

Moved by the reliable presence of the man who was her friend, Sally took Cap’n Jack’s hand. He was surprised, for whites very seldom touched their slaves, but understood her need.

“We been together a long time,” he said. “We seen some things.”

Sally nodded, and smiled. “You knew old Massa before I did,” she remembered.

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They both thought of the past, when they were young. Cap’n Jack gave a

wheezy chuckle.

“R’member how we set him up? I tole you where he went ridin’, an’ you was there, nursing yo’ chile, Miss Elizabeth, by yo’ first late husband?”

How could Sally forget? She remembered as if it were yesterday. She saw the river, and the tree she sat under with her tiny daughter. She could hear the horse’s hooves again, as the handsome young Irishman galloped toward her. She saw herself opening her dress, ostensibly to feed little Elizabeth, but actually so that when James rode by he would see things men were not supposed to see, in those days.

“Showing much more of myself than I should have,” she laughed.

“One took at yo’ lovely bosom, an’ he was gone, hook, line, and sinker!”

Cap’n Jack was lost in the same memory.

“And you saw the same thing because you were hiding behind a bush to make sure everything went well.” Sally laughed again, and slapped Cap’n Jack lightly on the hand. “Oh, we had some times.”

“We surely did,” the slave agreed. They sat together in the graveyard until it was dusk, and then Cap’n Jack helped Miss Sally home.

When Lizzie got back to the house, she made sure the children were fed, sent William out to play, and put the young ones to bed. She did all this herself, with only occasional grumbling assistance and instruction from Poppy, because Queen and Easter were not there. The children’s food wasn’t very good because Lizzie had never cooked so much as a pan of water before, but the children didn’t seem to mind. When Mrs. Henderson, who had accompanied her, protested that slaves should be doing the cooking, Lizzie told her, rather sharply, to mind her place. They were her children, and if Lizzie wanted to feed them herself, that was her business. Mrs. Henderson sniffed, said she knew where she wasn’t wanted, and left with rather ruffled feathers. Lizzie was pleased with herself. She couldn’t stand Mrs.

Henderson, and this was the first time she’d voiced her true feelings.

Later, alone in her room, Lizzie did something she hadn't

QUEEN 497

done in years. The death of the two children had been a cathartic experience for her. She had been distressed when tiny Jane had died, but she was only a few months old. These two had been different, because Lizzie loved them as little people, not as helpless babies.

She knew she wasn't going to like what the mirror would tell her, but she had never shrunk from it before, and she was brave enough, and honest enough about herself, to face the consequences. In any case, she already knew what it would say.

She had behaved badly since Jass left. She hated his going, and the war, and she had taken refuge from it by playing her accustomed role as helpless mistress to the hilt. But having to cope, alone, with the death of the children had made her understand that their world had been turned upside down. She realized that, for the duration of the war at least, she might have to respond differently to things, because she now understood that even when Jass came home, the war was not going to be over, and it might all get worse before it got better.

What surprised Lizzie was that she saw something to be proud of in the mirror. She saw that she could cope.

"I shall pick cotton," she told Sally at dinner. Parson Dick, whose hands were raw and blistered, almost dropped the soup tureen. Sally stared at her daughter in astonishment, and William giggled.

"Well, the cotton has to be picked, and we don't have enough hands,"

Lizzie said defensively, although the only reaction, apart from William's, had been silence. "If it rains, the crop will be ruined."

Parson Dick moved as quickly as good manners would allow to the kitchen, and told Queen, who was banging pots on the stove, to come and listen to this at

the pantry door.

“Do you think you’re up to it?” Sally couldn’t imagine Lizzie as a cotton picker.

“I’ve no idea,” Lizzie replied honestly. “I’ve never done it, I didn’t think I would ever have to do it, and once this war is sorted out and things are back to normal, I don’t intend to have to do it again.”

No one said anything, because no one realized she had finished.

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“But the harvest is in danger, and I am the mistress of this plantation.”

Lizzie couldn’t bear silence. “If the men are ready to sacrifice their lives for our survival, the least I can do is risk a few blisters.”

“Bravo, Mamma,” William applauded. “I’ll pick cotton, too. “

Queen and Parson Dick, huddled together at the pantry door, looked at one another in amazement.

“Wonders ain’t never going to cease,” Queen said, and hurried away to prepare the main course, because Sally was ringing the bell.

“I wish I could help,” Sally said. “I feel so useless.” She was impressed by Lizzie’s resolution, and wondered what had wrought this change in her.

“You’re too old to pick cotton, Gran’ma,” William laughed, and Sally gave him her best “old-fashioned” look.

“I used to be good at it,” she said, knowing it would shock the boy. “We had to turn our hands to all sorts of things, back in the early days.”

She looked at her openmouthed grandson, pleased with the effect, for truthfully, she had never picked cotton in her life. But she had done many things,

and would have picked cotton if the need had arisen.

“The days when I was young,” she added, tartly.

What she couldn't tell them, because she didn't know, was that it was backbreaking labor. Out there all day, in the baking sun, bent over those miserable damn bushes, the pricklers; tearing your hands. Lizzie had dressed for the occasion in her oldest clothes and had a sunbonnet on, and at the beginning she had quite enjoyed herself, but she was not prepared for the searing pain that arced through her back every time she stood.

Queen thoroughly approved of Lizzie's decision-they needed all the help they could get-but some of the field hands were not so sure. , “Tain't fittin', the Missy pickin' cotton,” Isaac grumbled. He had a strong sense of order.

The day was sultry and overcast, with storm clouds billowing toward them.

They labored on, a small band of convicts in a prison of white.

QUEEN 499

No matter how much she picked, it seemed to Lizzie that there was still as much as before. Finally, she couldn't stand it.

” I can't! I can't do it anymore,” she cried, and sat on the ground.

William ran to his mother.

“We got to, Miss Lizzie,” Queen called to her. “We got to pick this field 'fore it rains.”

“I'll help you, Mamma,” William said, though his hands were bleeding and raw.

Lizzie looked about at the endless cotton, and groaned. It wasn't fair; she

wasn't bom to this, brought up to this. For the first time in her life, she blessed the existence of nigras.

She looked at her eager son, and accepted his offer of help. She would complete the day because she had said she would, but that was enough, she would have done her bit, and she would never go near a cotton bush again.

Leaning on William, she climbed to her feet, and bent her back to her hated task.

Within the hour, Mrs. Henderson arrived, in high dudgeon. She had been enjoying a pleasant morning shouting at Jasmine, who cooked and cleaned for her, but the girl had eventually lost her temper. She told Mrs. Henderson that she should be out picking cotton, like the Missy, and then she'd know what it was like to be a slave.

Mrs. Henderson had hardly believed her ears, and had boxed Jasmine's for telling lies, but the girl stuck to her story. So Mrs. Henderson put on her best bonnet, and came to see what it was all about.

"What is this? Mrs. Jackson, what are you doing?" she cried in outraged distress, every fiber of her bourgeois, white Southern upbringing and aspirations insulted to the core.

"Queen needed help," Lizzie said lamely, glad of the interruption.

Mrs. Henderson was appalled. "So Queen is in charge now? Queen can order the mistress of the house into the fields, like some common nigger?"

"It was Mamma's idea," William defended Queen, while she, worried about her mother, lost her temper and shouted at Mrs. Henderson.

"Someone got to do it," she yelled. "Ain't enough of us niggers left! "

Mrs. Henderson turned to Queen, hating the uppity, bastard girl. Queen the adored, Queen the darling, Queen the treasure of the big house, whose very white-skinned existence flaunted her father's carnal baseness to the world, and was an affront to good Christian morality.

"Don't you sass me! " She began calmly enough, but reason failed her. She exploded in fury, her pent-up animosity to Queen flooding to the surface.

"Don't you ever sass me, or you will regret it to the end of your days."

The sheer violence of it shocked Lizzie and William, although the slaves had heard worse, and had felt worse, for the lash of the whip was more painful than the lash of the tongue.

Lizzie felt duty bound to excuse Queen, whom she didn't like, because it had been her idea.

"I do need a break," she said, and Mrs. Henderson took charge. "You come with me, Mrs. Jackson, there's water over here." She led Lizzie to the water bag.

"Five minutes," Queen yelled, defiantly.

Lizzie was already gulping water like a dying man in a desert. William came running to her for his share, and it was he who saw the cart first.

"Who's that?" he asked.

Lizzie put down the water bag and stood panting at the fence. She squinted in the direction of William's pointing, to the main gate, and saw a cart, with some men in it, stopped there.

Someone in the cart helped another man down, and that man now come trudging up the drive.

Mrs. Henderson saw the man, too.

"Please God, let it be-" she whispered.

But Lizzie knew who it was, and was running for all she was worth. Mrs.

Henderson realized who it was too, and walked away, quietly, to be by herself and pray for her husband's welfare.

"We ain't done yet-" Queen called to Lizzie, but Cap'n Jack stopped her.

"It the Massa," he said quietly.

It was Jass, home from the war. Lizzie, screaming at him, ran to him, pell-mell into his arms, and clung to him as if she would never let him go.

QUEEN 501

Sally had spent the day with Easter, in the weaving house. Easter was very ill, and when she had not come to the big house in the morning, Sally had gone to her. Sally could only guess at the problem, and feared it might be typhoid. It might as easily be diphtheria, caught from the children, or exhaustion, or measles, or any of a dozen fevers. Queen, who had less experience with illness, was worried, but relieved by Sally's presence, and, reluctantly, had gone to her place as mistress of the cotton fields.

It was serious, Sally knew, for she was used to death, and could guess it was hovering by. She had made Easter as comfortable as her condition would allow, and wiped the sweat from her with cold compresses. For a while, Easter slept, but uneasily, and when she woke, Sally knew the end was near. Easter's eyes were yellow, her skin dull, and she was having difficulty breathing.

Sally went to the door to call for help, and saw a little slave girl playing not far away.

"You girl," she called, and remembered the child's name. "Tilly! You run fetch Queen, you hear? Her Mammy's sick. You run as fast as you can."

Tilly was wide-eyed with fear. She knew the old lady with the white hair was the old Missy, but had never been spoken to by her before. But she was a

wellmannered girl and did as she was told.

“Run!” Sally cried.

And Tilly ran.

Queen stood in the cotton field, Cap’n Jack beside her, and watched the distant figure of Jass put his arm around his wife and son, and walk with them to the big house.

He was home at last, and everything was going to be all right. He’d solve all their problems: She wouldn’t have to work in the fields anymore and could spend her time nursing her sick mother, and Easter would get better, because Jass was home.

She looked at the field. All the slaves had stopped work to watch the return of the Massa.

“Still got to be picked,” she called to them. They bent to

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their task, and a few of them started the work song again, for it was a sad homecoming, with the Massa’s two little daughters buried.

Queen worked hard and with a will. In an hour she could take a break and go see to her mother. Perhaps she wouldn’t have to come back to the fields this afternoon; she’d ask Jass when he talked to her. He’d speak to her soon, she was sure, but it was only right and proper he should talk to his wife first.

She was surprised to hear someone calling her name. She looked up and saw that sweet child, Tilly, running to her. Perhaps the Massa had sent for her.

“Queen,” Tilly called. “Come quick! Yo’ mammy’s sick!”

There was nothing in Queen’s mind now but her mammy. She had seen her

that morning and knew she was not well, but Easter's true crisis had not developed until later, when Missy Sally had come to look after her so that Queen could work. If Missy Sally was saying she was sick, and no one else could have sent the message, then it was serious.

She dropped her bag and ran, with lung-bursting energy, through the field. Flecks of cotton danced in the air, sparkling in the sunlight, like pure white gold, as she ran.

Cap'n Jack ran too. But to the big house, to tell Jass.

Grief flowed on grief for Jass, until he thought he must drown in an ocean of sorrow. Despite his bitterness at the brevity of his military career, he had come home with such high, bright hopes, to be loved and to be in a world he understood.

As he got down from the cart, he stared at his property with a mounting sense of unease. He'd been away only six months, but there was an atmosphere of disrepair and neglect about the place. He saw the distant figures picking cotton, but only half the number there should have been, and there were still acres to be picked before the rain came.

Then Lizzie, dressed as a field hand, ran screaming into his arms, and clutched him, and wept, and blurted out the news of the death of his daughters. He hardly knew how to respond, for it was too shocking and unexpected and the enormity of what had happened was too great for him to assimilate.

He took his wife and son to the big house, sat with them

QUEEN 503

in the kitchen, and said very little while he heard the stories of their deprivation in his absence. He wished they'd stop, because he wanted to be alone, but could not be yet, because he was husband and father.

Then Cap'n Jack burst in, and told him that Easter was dying.

Without saying a word, Jass got up from the table, left the room, left the house, and walked, faster and faster, to the one place in the world that was constant to him, and was not constant anymore.

He heard Lizzie call after him. "This is your family!" She sounded angry, but he didn't care.

He shivered with fear as he walked. He could see it now, nestling in the trees as it always had, the cottage of his dreams, and he began to run, as he ran to it once, so many years ago, on the night his father died.

She had been there then, waiting for him, as she always waited for him, and she had to be there now, because she was always there.

But just as he started to run, he heard an awful scream from inside the house, and he stopped running, for he understood what the dreadful sound meant, and his blood ran cold.

He came into the weaving house and saw what he had known he would see.

Easter was lying on the bed, her eyes closed in death.

Queen -was beside her, sobbing, and clinging to her mother, as if to drag her back from her new dominion, and Sally was comforting Queen.

He hadn't spoken, had hardly made a sound when he came in, but somehow Queen knew he was there. She ran to him, threw herself at his feet and clutched at his legs, begging him to bring her mammy back, to make everything all right again.

He saw what she did and heard what she said, but without seeing and without hewing. The only thing he could see was the awful image of Easter, and then his mind exploded, and refused to accept what his eyes saw. He turned his head away, so that he wouldn't have to look at her.

Sally came to Queen and pulled her from her father, the Massa.

"Come, girl, come," she said. "Save your grief till later. We must 'get a winding sheet."